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Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

# **Interim statutory guidance on multi-location meetings**

**Further to section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021**

**May 2021**

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of this guidance

This is interim guidance to support the provision of multi-location meetings for principal councils, which means county and county borough councils, national park authorities, and fire and rescue authorities in Wales (referred to as relevant authorities) and port health authorities. This is covered by section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, which we refer to as “the 2021 Act”. This guidance will continue to be developed in light of the operation and experience of implementing the provisions of the 2021 Act and will be incorporated into a wider set of guidance which is being prepared to address a range of other provisions contained within the 2021 Act.

The overall purpose of the Welsh Government in amending the law to give relevant authorities powers and freedoms to convene meetings in this way is to achieve greater accessibility and improved public participation in local government. These powers are closely connected with the new requirement for relevant authorities to broadcast (by audio and/or video) certain meetings. This responsibility to broadcast is not covered directly in this guidance and will not come in to force until May 2022.

Multi-location meetings offer authorities the potential to update and transform the way they do business. It provides an opportunities for authorities to become more flexible and efficient and also raise their profile in the local community and to bring their 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 – attendance levels during the pandemic bear this out. This heightened public awareness and involvement is to be welcomed – and further encouraged. In particular, authorities will need to think directly about the needs of the public as they design their arrangements and policies for multi-location meetings. 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.

This guidance is for principal councils, national park authorities, fire and rescue authorities, and port health authorities. This guidance does not cover the arrangement by other public bodies of their own formal meetings, or the organisation by public bodies (including councils) of public meetings or any other gathering. It also does not include the convening of formal meetings by corporate joint committees (CJs) or community councils, on which separate guidance is being prepared.

This guidance is intended for:

- Participants in meetings convened by the authorities listed above;
- Officers providing support to formal meetings in these authorities;
- Officers with adjacent responsibilities – for example, those responsible for drafting and clearing reports, attending meetings to present reports to members and officers with supervisory responsibilities on governance matters;
- Officers with these responsibilities in fire and rescue authorities and national park authorities;
- Anyone with an interest in the way in which the business of these authorities is conducted.

The authorities to which this guidance applies (principal authorities, NPAs, FRAs, port health authorities) are described as “relevant authorities” throughout. Further definitions are provided in section 1.3 below.

Generally speaking the requirements for all relevant authorities is similar, although differences do exist – especially relating to the convening of multi-location meetings of local authority executives, which is covered in section 4.3.

Neither this guidance nor the legislation to which it refers, does not apply to Police and Crime Panels. Strategic policing is a reserved matter. At the time of writing, from 6 May 2021 Police and Crime Panels may only be convened physically.

Relevant authorities are required to “have regard to” the guidance. Where authorities are under an existing statutory obligation to carry out an act the guidance says that they “must” do something; where there is no such obligation but the guidance presents a suggestion on a possible course of action, the guidance says that a council “can” or “may” do something.

## **1.2 How this guidance was developed**

This guidance was developed between February and April 2021. It was drafted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, Cardiff University and Public Governance Wales, who were commissioned by Welsh Government to speak to people with a stake and interest in this area and to develop the text as a result of these conversations.

This is interim guidance, which will be reviewed and where necessary amended in May 2022 based on the experiences of relevant authorities, and the public.

## **1.3 Definitions of words used in this document**

Generally, the words used in this guidance 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 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; there will be a requirement that formal meetings are held in public and that notice is published beforehand that they are being held. 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 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 councillors 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 council 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”. This guidance and the legislation 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.

The definition of “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 council 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 an elected councillor, 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. This guidance suggests that these arrangements will form part of relevant authorities’ constitutions.

## **1.4 Background to multi-location meetings**

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 council convened meetings by remote means throughout 2020 and part of 2021. Experience 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 2021 Act can be seen as an evolution of these prior arrangements.

## **1.5 The benefits of multi-location meetings**

Councils, and other relevant authorities, have been convening all their meetings by remote means throughout much of 2020 and 2021. While meeting this way has proven challenging in the context of the global coronavirus pandemic, it has 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 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. The move to an approach which sees the production of formal notices and other material as being “online by default” will make it easier for councils to innovate around the use of formal meeting material;
  - Making it easier for the public to attend meetings. Although experiences have been mixed, public attendance has been higher for multi-location meetings than for meetings in person. Some authorities, in particular, found both before and during the pandemic that multi-location meetings have made it possible to include external participants actively, ensuring that council committees can benefit from a greater range of views. Authorities have reported that members of the public think that multi-location meetings are much less intimidating than those held in person, and that they have the potential to encourage more people to stand for public office. For some though, 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;
  - Making relevant authorities more resilient and sustainable in how they carry out their work. The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 requires 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 councils 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;
  - Making the use of the Welsh medium easier. Councils’ experience during 2020 has been that the simultaneous translation on platforms such as Zoom has reduced some of the practical difficulties which some authorities have experienced around the use of the Welsh medium in public meetings.
  - Reducing the need for travel. For more rural authorities and for authorities covering large geographical areas and for joint bodies, 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 for younger people;
  - Better support for councillors from diverse backgrounds, including support that recognises with the social model of disability. Just as barriers are being removed to public participation, multi-location meetings have made it easier for women, 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. Of course, this raises broader issues around the way that authorities work generally, and the extent to which they welcome participation and involvement from a wide range of people. These are not matters which will be resolved through multi-location meetings alone, but such meetings could be a tool that will, in due course, help a wider range of people to take an active role in local democracy;
- Better behaviours. Although experiences have been mixed, meeting management and the behaviours of participants have both improved. It has been easier for Chairs of meetings to understand who wants to make a contribution, although it is harder to read body language. Disruption of meetings by political argument (for example) seems to have been less of a theme as well.

Multi-location meetings are not “second best”, with all-physical meetings representing the “gold standard”. 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.**

For some, there have been drawbacks to multi-location meetings. In particular, people have had worries about the need for more council officers to support them. In time, ongoing experience is likely to improve this and reduce the amount of resource required to support them.

## **1.6 What this guidance covers**

This guidance focuses particularly on arrangements for the convening of formal meetings held by relevant authorities under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, and the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Decisions, Documents and Meetings) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2021. Guidance on broadcasting these meetings, where required in law, is being provided separately.

Together, this legislation updates arrangements for the management of these meetings and to enhance transparency and public access. Previously arrangements for multi-location meetings were found in section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011.

This guidance also engages with other enactments relating to this issue, as well as with the wider local democratic context within which the Act sits.

This guidance focuses particularly on arrangements for the convening and broadcast of formal local authority meetings. Provisions relating to local authority meetings are included in various pieces of legislation, including but not limited to:

- The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021
- The Local Government Act 2000
- The Local Government Act 1972
- The Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Decisions, Documents and Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2001.
- The National Park Authorities (Wales) Order 1995

Chapter 4 of Part 3 of the 2021 Act covers meetings convened by relevant authorities, as well as by certain other bodies and organisations. In respect of principal councils, community councils, national parks authorities, fire and rescue authorities and port health authorities, it covers:

- Electronic broadcasts of meetings. Relevant authorities must make arrangements for broadcasting certain meetings live, and ensuring that broadcasts are available electronically afterwards. A failure to comply with this requirement does not necessarily make proceedings invalid (s46). Separate Regulations and guidance are being prepared on this matter;
- Attendance at meetings: Relevant authorities must make arrangements for “multi-location” meetings, at which participants can hear and (in respect of meetings which must be broadcast) see each other (s47);
- Notice of meetings, and publication of agendas: Relevant authorities must publish certain information, including notices of meetings, electronically, and electronic information relating to meetings must remain available in this format for six years

following the date of the meeting (Part 1 of Schedule 4 to the 2021 Act, amending the Local Government Act 1972). Authorities must also put in place facilities for the public who would otherwise not be able to do so, to access electronic meeting documents.

Arrangements for the broadcast of meetings (physical or multi-location) held by relevant authorities is explored in separate Regulations and separate guidance which will come in to force in May 2022. However, authorities are likely to need to consider the requirement to broadcast alongside the need to make provision for multi-location meetings. This is the reason for suggesting that meeting arrangements take account of both requirements.

## **2. GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

Relevant authorities will need to think about and agree independently the details of their own arrangements for multi-location meetings. In doing so, they should be guided by the following general principles.

All of the below relate to legal obligations. In developing meeting arrangements, authorities will need to explicitly assure themselves that these principles are understood, taken into account and acted on, possibly through being the subject of specific discussion at a Democratic Services Committee or other body.

Of paramount importance are the needs of local democracy. Local people need to have confidence that relevant authorities have systems in place that meet their needs – this might be about observing meetings, participating in them, and using this to hold to account a meeting’s participants for what they see and do. Relevant authorities’ approach to multi-location meetings has to be seen as part of the wider support and commitment to local democracy. The other principles described below need to be considered in light of this.

### **2.1 Transparency**

Formal meetings of relevant authorities 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. Relevant authorities will need to think about wider legal requirements around transparency, and accessibility, and what that means for the way that they carry out meetings. These meetings allow public and media involvement as observers whether they are held in person or virtually.

(Local Government Act 1972, s100 et seq., Schedule 12 and 12A and related legislation)

### **2.2 Accessibility**

Democratic systems need to be organised and arranged to account for barriers that members of the public might experience. Multi-location meetings have the potential to enhance and improve access for participants. This will not happen automatically however, and meeting arrangements will need to be specifically designed to help this to happen.

Relevant authorities’ meeting arrangements will need to have regard for the protected characteristics under the Equality Act, 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.

(Equality Act 2010)



## **2.3 Good conduct**

In line with the Nolan Principles, multi-location meetings, as with any other public meeting, should demonstrate high standards of conduct.

Multi-location meetings have in many places led to changes in conduct, and an improvement in behaviours. Meeting arrangements can 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.

Councils will also need to have regard to the Model Code of Conduct (and to local codes of conduct, and standards arrangements) in how they develop their meeting arrangements.

(Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) (Wales) (Amendment) Order 2016)

## **2.4 Welsh Language**

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. In order to maximise accessibility authorities may wish to consider subtitling in English and/or Welsh, and translation into other languages depending on need – for example, BSL.

Arrangements must support and promote the Welsh Language, ensuring that use of English and Welsh is treated equivalently. The use of the Welsh medium can be provided for in multi-location meetings – and normalised in a wide range of settings – in ways which might historically have proven challenging for physical meetings.

(Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011)

## **2.5 Local Needs**

Local authorities are democratic institutions. Decisions about local democracy – and the best approaches to promote and encourage engagement in local democratic systems – are best made at a local level. Authorities' approaches to meeting arrangements should therefore be aligned with the way that they approach public participation – in particular, their plans for ensuring that they meet their public participation obligations when these obligations become law in May 2022. An understanding of the specific needs of a wide range of local people is a part of this.

(Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, on public participation).

## **2.6 Future generations**

In agreeing arrangements for meetings, authorities must give regard to the well-being goals and ways of working set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Many of the improvements which could be brought about by multi-location meetings – innovation around the transaction of meetings, reductions in the use of paper, enhanced public accessibility and so on – will serve the objective of making local democratic systems more sustainable.

However, relevant authorities will still need to ensure that the 2015 Act's principles are actively embedded in arrangements for meetings. Digitisation has the potential to significantly reduce the carbon footprint of local democratic systems, but only where cloud services and server storage is procured from carbon neutral providers – digital services are not carbon neutral by default.

### 3. CORE REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the things that relevant authorities **must** do in relation to multi-location meetings.

These provisions are set out to help ensure legal compliance. In all respects it will be for a relevant authority's Monitoring Officer to determine exactly how the authority will ensure this compliance. The expectation is that authorities will want to use these requirements as a starting point from which to innovate and experiment with different arrangements for facilitating multi-location meetings, in the context of the wider needs of local democracy.

The Act requires that "arrangements" be made for both the broadcasting of meetings, and the convening of meetings involving participants in multiple locations. These "meeting arrangements" will need to be written in such a way that integrates a relevant authority's approach to multi-location arrangements to its wider compliance with the legislative framework for formal meetings, including the new requirements for the audio and (in certain circumstances) video broadcasting of such meetings.

Although the requirement to broadcast certain meetings will not commence until May 2022, many principal councils already broadcast a number of their meetings, we therefore suggest that these arrangements form an integrated part of an authority's Constitution. For principal councils such arrangements might be subject to oversight from the Democratic Services Committee.

The reason for integrating these arrangements into constitutional document is that they set out how the authority is run, and will need to be integrated in some form into the rules of procedure of committees and other formal bodies.

Relevant authorities will need to develop these arrangements for themselves – there is no single set of rules setting out what arrangements should look like in detail. This guidance sets out a framework within which authorities can explore their options and decide what is right for them and the communities they serve.

### 4. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This section sets out things to which relevant authorities must give regard, but which do not form part of the legislative framework.

Welsh Government considers these considerations to be matters of good practice. Some specific solutions are suggested but relevant authorities should consider local circumstances in deciding what approaches are ultimately adopted, in a process which should be led by those involved in participating in meetings, and supporting those meetings' operation – always informed by the needs and expectations of the public. While meeting arrangements should fit local preferences and circumstances, there should be a clear process for considering the issues highlighted below. The Democratic Services Committee is expected to lead this process.

Sitting alongside the core requirements of the "meeting arrangements" – the legally mandated arrangements that relevant authorities must make for multi-location meetings – can sit a wider multi-location meetings policy, which will also reflect the general principles in section 2 while setting out more detailed systems to ensure that multi-location meetings work efficiently, effectively and accountably. Keeping such a policy distinct from the legal "meeting arrangements" is important because it 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.

Relevant authorities can take whatever process they choose in designing and adopting this policy, but those responsible for leadership on governance matters, and participants in multi-location meetings, will need to be satisfied that these arrangements take into account the general principles we set out in section 2. In particular, the meetings policy will be the place to centre the role of the public in the operation of formal meetings, and to ensure that their needs and expectations are understood and treated as paramount.

Because of the public-facing nature of this work authorities may consider it necessary to adopt a provisional policy, and for those within that authority and outside it (in particular, the public) to develop and refine it over time. Live review of the policy (and of the meeting arrangements themselves) as they operate will offer the best opportunity to reflect and refine.

Where a relevant authority determines that they wish to draft such a policy it should be led by a committee of the authority with a responsibility for governance, supported by a relevant officer. This might be that authority's Monitoring Officer. Where the authority is a principal council, the best place might be the Democratic Services Committee, and the officer taking leadership might properly be the Head of Democratic Services.

The exact contents of a policy will be down to local agreement. The experience of authorities in the past however suggests that it should include:

- How to decide which meetings will have physical provision made for them, and which will be conducted wholly through remote means. (section 4.1);
- Which online meeting platform or platforms which will be used (section 4.2);
- How formal notices will be issued, and the publication of agendas and minutes (section 4.3);
- How exempt matters will be dealt with (section 4.3);
- Meeting attendance, including deciding where a member is "present" (section 4.4);
- How participants who sit as part of committees or bodies subject to the Act will be able to access and participate in the meeting (including support and advice on technology, behavioural and conduct issues) (section 4.5);
- How observers (including the public and the press) will be able to access the meeting, and how they may actively participate in the meeting where needed (4.6);
- Facilitating broadcast by members of the public (4.7). Broadcast by the authority itself may also be required, and is covered by separate guidance.
- Chairing of meetings (4.8)
- The taking of votes (4.9);
- Training and peer support to ensure that participants are able to take part (4.10)

It is important to ensure that participants and observers have access to easy to understand information which explains how they can and should engage in multi-location meetings – this documentation can be part of the multi-location meetings policy but should also be available separately, and may constitute a simple explanation of some of those arrangements for the casual reader. It is particularly important the relevant authorities highlight and publicise its multi-location meeting arrangements and policy to make it as easy as possible for the public to engage.

## **4.1 Taking different approaches for different meetings**

***Some relevant authorities may decide that all meetings will be conducted through remote means by default. Authorities may wish to adopt different approaches for different bodies, and for different circumstances.***

In general

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 authorities to decide that all meetings will be held entirely physically.

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 be remote means. The overriding intention of the Act on this issue 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 authorities themselves is important but the needs of the public will come first when these decisions are being made.

Relevant authorities may want to make particular plans for multi-location meetings where a number of participants are in the same physical space, while others join through remote means. Similarly, provisions might need to be made for allowing people to observe in person, or through remote means, or both.

There is no requirement for each kind of meeting to be held in the same way every time it meets. For example, a council could decide to hold some full council meetings entirely remotely and others as multi-location meetings with a number of councillors (or most councillors) present in a chamber. In determining which meetings may be held wholly through remote meetings and for which physical arrangements might be made available, authorities might consider:

- The general circumstances of participants. Participants' needs and preferences may changes over time, and policies should have the flexibility to allow for arrangements to change where this happens. For example, councillors in a local authority may decide that full Council should take place predominantly physically or predominantly through remote means – but in doing so they might ensure that the policy remains flexible enough to change this approach if participants' views change;
- 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. This is discussed in more detail in section 4.7;

The overriding need is to consider the needs of the public, both as observers and participants.

Authorities may have concerns about equality of access and participation in multi-location meetings where some participants are in the same physical space. On considering the risks and other circumstances they may determine that, by default, meetings can take place either wholly by remote means, or that, where a number of participants express a preference for a meeting being held physically, that support should be given to all participants to attend physically. However it is worth reiterating that authorities will not be able to require that all participants attend physically under these circumstances.

Where a relevant authority decides that physical arrangements will be made for certain meetings or classes of meetings, a multi-location meetings policy will need to determine what those arrangements will be. They may include:

- The availability of a meeting room which is publicly accessible, along with the provision of a physical public gallery (and press gallery);
- Making arrangements for participants who attend physically to be seen by those joining from other locations (a requirement under the Act), which will require planning where multiple participants wish to attend physically and where camera facilities in a room may be less than ideal for this purpose;
- The availability of professional support in the room, or through remote means. This may be IT support or governance/clerking support;
- The streaming of broadcast footage from the meeting to those present through the use of one or more display screens (and the use of audio equipment).

Even where all participants join a meeting from another location a relevant authority may still wish to provide a physical space for members of the public to watch proceedings and to participate. This is covered in section 4.7 below.

#### Accessibility and involvement

Some participants may wish to join meetings from another location regularly – because they have working or caring responsibilities which make attending meetings in person difficult. Some participants may have a preference for physical meetings. Participants may have personal protected characteristics, or circumstances, which limits their ability to participate online, and/or which requires that certain accommodations be made for physical presence. The same needs are likely to apply to observers. Particular care will be needed to be taken to take account of the needs of one-off participants, especially if they are members of the public rather than employed officers of the authority or regular meeting participants who are (for example) elected councillors.

Multi-location meetings where some or most participants are present in a single location can pose challenges around accessibility and involvement. Those present in a committee room will need to be able to participate on the same footing as those participating in other locations. This may be a difficult where certain participants may be able to hear, but not see, other participants. For these kinds of meetings, there is a risk that those not physically present in a room play less of a part in discussion. These people may end up being “forgotten” by those who are physically present. For a Chair, following the visual cues of those in the same room, and those joining from other locations, is likely to be a challenge. This will need to be thought about, particularly where the Chair themselves is joining a meeting from another location.

## **4.2 Multi-location meeting platforms**

***Multi-location meetings require additional technology and this has implications for an authority's capacity to procure and use this technology effectively. Finding and using the right platform is an important part of making meetings accessible and transparent, and the business of relevant authorities more accountable to the public.***

This guidance does not recommend any specific product. Authorities have made, and will make, their own arrangements in line with their IT and procurement policies. It may be, for example, that relevant authorities wish to explore joint procurement opportunities. It will be useful for authorities procuring to understand how the market for these products evolved, and the need to keep in touch with other authorities to exchange experiences.

Specifically, any product, or combination of products, should provide:

- 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. Councils should ensure that they use a meeting platform which provides for simultaneous translation and that members are comfortable with its use. Councils will need to decide whether to broadcast a feed in English, in Welsh, or in both – this is covered in more detail in separate guidance on broadcast;
- 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 (the use of which we discuss in section x.x below), 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;
- A user interface which is intuitive and easily understood.

Other factors will include:

- Where and how meetings will be broadcast – for example, on the council’s own website or on Facebook Live or YouTube, or in some other way (covered in separate guidance). It is not recommended that councils effect the broadcast requirement by granting public access to online meeting platforms themselves. Broadcast arrangements are dealt with in separate guidance, but again, the needs of the public as observers will be especially important;
- Arrangements where joint meetings are held between authorities which, by default, use different platforms;
- Arrangements for when difficulties with technology emerge, or other circumstances might make it impossible to broadcast a meeting (covered in section 4.6);
- Provision for electronic voting.

Authorities may wish to consult participants and observers to ensure that IT arrangements work for them, and that the technology means that multi-location meetings are as accessible as they could be.

### **4.3 Notices, agendas, reports and providing for exempt matters**

***Alongside multi-location meetings, relevant authorities will need to continue to issue notice of the convening of meetings, and make arrangements for the publication of agendas and reports, online. There are both issues and opportunities associated with this.***

- Transparency around the work programmes of bodies covered by these rules. Agendas and papers are usually expected to be published five clear working days in advance of meetings (and the detail of notice requirements are covered in more detail in the section below), but authorities may wish to consider how the interests of transparency and accessibility can be served by earlier notification of proposed agenda items – through more accessible and visible work programmes and through attention being given to the visibility and accuracy of a schedule of forthcoming decisions (which in the case of a principal council executive will be the Forward Plan);

- Arrangements to ensure that those viewing a broadcast can be easily signposted to the agenda, reports and (in the case of recorded meetings) the minutes, and to any relevant background documentation;

Full detail of notice requirements for meetings (and other formal requirements for the publication of agendas, reports and minutes) can now be found:

- For local authority executives, at the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Decisions, Documents and Meetings) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2021;
- For other meetings of relevant authorities, amendments made to Part 5A and schedule 12 of the Local Government Act 1972.

The principal object of these amendments to the existing legal framework is to remove the requirement for the production of hard copy paperwork relating to formal meetings (except for a couple of specific purposes), and to require authorities to make formal information available electronically, on their website.

The new arrangements can be summarised as follows:

#### Notice of meetings

- Public notice of all meetings must be published on the authority's website three clear days before the meeting (at the time it is convened, if it is convened at shorter notice);
- Notice must 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 held if it is partly or wholly taking place physically;
- Notice requirements also apply where a formal meeting is taking place which is not open to the public. Here, notification is required of the time of the meeting, the fact that it is being held by remote means, and that it is not open to the public.

Usually notice of meetings would be provided on an authority's website; councils may also make arrangements for notifications to be sent to councillors, and interested people via subscription, automatically on the uploading of agenda papers. Authorities may also make use of social media to highlight the publication of notice (although notification on social media will not constitute notice for the purposes of the Regulations).

#### Agendas and reports

- The agenda and reports for public meetings (including late reports) must be published on the website of the authority;
- Paper agendas do need to be made available to members of the public attending meetings held partly physically;
- Recording of decisions by the executive collectively or individually, as well as the recording of business carried out in other meetings of principal councils. This requires that the names of who attended the meeting be recorded alongside apologies, declarations of interest and decisions made. This must be published within 7 working days of the meeting taking place. In the interests of clarity this does not require that a member's or members' signatures are required to be recorded (as has been the case previously). The information referred to above must be published on authorities' websites. ;
- Background papers relating to meetings of principal councils must now be proactively published on a website, not merely be available (although, exceptionally, if it is impractical to do this, they must be open for public inspection). This is an important change; it involves the automatic placement in the public domain of specified documents which may previously have only been, in practice, published on application.

Councils will therefore need to think carefully about how background papers are identified, produced and prepared for publication.

- The transaction of paperless business generally. Multi-location meetings are likely to be paperless. Regulations now specify that formal information relating to meetings be published on a council's website, with the requirement of hard copy material being on public deposit having been removed;

The provisions around electronic publication of notices, agendas, reports and other meeting information by principal councils is subject to an important caveat. The Act specifies that principal councils have to make arrangements that all such information is still available for individuals who cannot access it electronically. There may be people who cannot access information electronically and councils will need to put arrangements in place to meet their needs – recognising that different people will have different needs and expectations.

### Exempt matters

Bodies covered by the legislation will need to be able to consider exempt matters in private. Exempt matters are things which a relevant authority is allowed not to publish because they are confidential. This may be for a range of reasons, which are set out in schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. Agendas with exempt items on the agenda are often divided into a Part I – held in public – and a Part II – held in private.

A separate call on the online platform, separate from the call used for broadcast, should be set up for those participating in a meeting by remote means. This reduces the risk that exempt material may be inadvertently made public through being broadcast. The original, public, call can be left open and can continue to broadcast (with an appropriate slide to notify viewers that the committee or body is in private session), so that the Chair and other participants can return to formally close the meeting, or transact any other business. This will allow relevant authorities to make clear to observers what is happening, and why.

Information provided to participants covering exempt matters should be dealt with in the same way as they would be for physical meetings. Bearing in mind that information will now be managed electronically by default under the notice and agenda arrangements highlighted above, councils may want to ensure that more prominent warnings be placed on exempt material, or whether a different colour can be applied to the background of such material to reflect the fact that, in hard copy, exempt material is usually printed on different colour paper for this reason. In doing so, relevant authorities will need to think about the accessibility needs of participants (around colour contrasts, for example).

### Innovation in how agendas and paperwork are produced and presented

The removal of the general requirement to provide information in hard copy by default invites the possibility for more innovation and creativity. This is not innovation for its own sake, but innovation designed to better engage the public in the work of relevant authorities. Local people will be able to follow and track the way that discussions are had, and decisions made, entirely online. The removal of hard copy notices will allow relevant authorities to experiment with the use of technology to make navigating the decision-making process, in particular, easier.

Relevant authorities may wish to consider how information might be made more accessible through creative use of committee content management systems to present information differently – for example, by moving away from the production of “agenda report packs” as a single PDF and towards the use of more accessible files, and file formats, which help both councillors, other meeting participants and members of the public to engage in formal business. This may include thinking about the way that minutes are drafted and presented,



providing links to the substantive reports discussed, and also with the relevant section of the recording or broadcast of the meeting.

#### Hard copy archiving

Councils should however consider the needs of archiving. It is common practice that councils (and other relevant authorities) retain and bind, or otherwise store for historical purposes, hard copies of the records of formal proceedings of the authority. There is an obligation that formal information be retained for a period of six years although it is considered good practice to do so in perpetuity.

Archiving is likely to be possible and necessary for electronic documentation – agendas, reports, minutes, background papers and other information important for researchers, historians or others to understand how decisions have come to be made. Relevant authorities will need to think about how they build systems to make sure that material produced predominantly, or entirely, electronically will be archived.

## **4.4 Meeting attendance**

***Multi-location meetings provide additional challenges in terms of meeting attendance. It is important for the integrity of voting procedures and attendance records that expectations and procedures are clear.***

Meeting arrangements and/or the meetings policy should make clear when a participant is considered to be “present”. There are a variety of circumstances in which this might become an issue – for example, in the taking of votes. Meeting arrangements may not engage with the detail of these issues (and others) because not all circumstances can be anticipated in advance. Local determination is important here.

Instead, the Monitoring Officer and/or governance officer in attendance at a meeting should be able to use agreed principles to provide a Chair with consistent advice over whether a participant should or should not be regarded as “present”.

This is particularly important for the taking of votes but is also relevant for participation in meetings more generally. It is likely also to have salience if the need to determine if a member has been present at a meeting is relevant for the purpose of determining whether they have attended a council meeting in the past six months (s85, Local Government Act 1972).

Particular circumstances might include:

- Connection problems. The connection may drop, making it difficult for some participants to follow debate and discussion. It may also disrupt a broadcast feed. A loss of connection may not be immediately apparent to others present. Certain committees or bodies may resolve matters through a general expression of consent rather than a roll call vote, meaning that some participants may lose the opportunity to express disagreement under these circumstances;
- Participants in meetings joining by remote means by video may seek to disable video to stabilise their connection or because they have been temporarily interrupted by events at their location - it may be unclear whether some participants are present or not. Authorities will need to think about whether the requirement to be both seen and heard, for most meetings, allows for brief, temporary interruption like this;
- Where a participant is in the “waiting room” on an online platform. Here, participants will probably not be considered “present” as they cannot be seen and heard by others, cannot see and hear others (other than through a broadcast stream) and can play no active part in the meeting. The same may apply to participants who are only watching the broadcast feed as an observer.

This list is provided as an illustration; individual authorities will need to make the decisions on these points that are right for them, and which they are confident both meet the needs of the law and the needs and expectations of local people in how local democracy is transacted.

Relevant authorities may decide that an officer could check to ensure ongoing presence at a meeting by requiring members to “sound off” in the meeting chat at the beginning of each substantive item, as we suggested in section 4.5. This could also provide a way to check presence in advance of a vote, as we suggest in section 4.10.

#### The withdrawal of members with a prejudicial interest

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. The nature of an interest and whether or not it is prejudicial will be for an authority and its Monitoring Officer to decide.

For a physical meeting it is usual practice for a participant declaring such an interest to leave the room entirely while discussion is underway, as the mere act of ongoing presence of that individual could be seen as influencing the committee’s action.

Where a 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. Other participants should however be aware that the participant will be able to observe the broadcast of the meeting while outside. Authorities may seek to include in their policies and meeting arrangements a requirement that participants with prejudicial interests undertake not to observe a broadcast for the reasons set out above, although we note that there is no definitive way to police this requirement and it may be seen as overly restrictive.

Once the matter has been concluded the clerk or support officer to the committee should immediately notify the relevant participant so that they can re-join the meeting, and the meeting should not continue until they have re-joined (otherwise they should be marked as not present for any further items).

## **4.5 Support during meetings**

***Support and advice will usually need to be provided to the participants of multi-location meetings, usually relating to matters of procedure. Participants (especially the Chair of the meeting) will need to find an appropriate way to seek and obtain this advice to ensure the smooth running of the meeting.***

Online platforms used by relevant authorities to convene multi-location meetings will usually have a chat function. The chat function will provide a useful way for advice to be shared and the business of the meeting to be managed, but its use can be open to misunderstanding.

Meeting policies should explain how this function will be used. Some authorities may think it sensible to ban use of the chat function outright, either in all meetings or in some, specified, meetings.

#### Pros of chat functions

- Allows advice to be given by governance officers without disrupting the meeting;
- Allows the Chair to “cue up” and acknowledge requests by committee members to contribute without disrupting the flow of questioning;
- Allows members to generally express assent or agreement with another participant, or with a proposal to resolve a given issue, in a manner which gives the Chair confidence to proceed (although the fact that consent has been given in this way would need to be verbally acknowledged by the Chair in the interests of transparency);

- Allows the Chair or clerk to check whether a particular member is still “present”, as we outline in section 4.10

#### Cons of chat functions

- Can be seen as undermining the transparency of the meeting;
- Can risk participants becoming distracted;
- Risk that participants use the chat for personal communication, and that this communication becomes inadvertently visible to other participants and to the public;
- Risk that chat will involve conversation about the matters under discussion without that discussion being visible to others, or recorded properly. Multi-location meetings policies may need to decide on the status of material recorded in the chat, and whether it can be used by the clerk to assist in the preparation of minutes;
- Risk that the chat becomes a place for general chit-chat or political needling.

The chat function will usually need to be limited to participants and the governance officer – but participants should treat conversations in chat as if they are happening in public.

Participants may decide to use WhatsApp or other messaging platforms to communicate over the course of the meeting. These platforms are not in the control of the authority; care should be taken in how they are used. For example, in the case of principal councils, if used within a political group, certain uses of WhatsApp could be seen as coming into conflict with the ban on the use of political management (whipping) at scrutiny committees.

#### Officer support arrangements

Different meetings will require different kinds of support from governance officers, and others. In the short term, as authorities adapt to multi-location meetings (and, in particular, adapt to meetings where some may join through remote means and some physically) it may be necessary to think about the need for additional support. In due course, familiarity and confidence with new systems (and training and development for both officers and participants) will reduce this need.

Multi-location meeting policies will need to specify the kind, and level, of support necessary for specific meetings, and the circumstances where support can be provided by remote means and where officers might need to be physically present.

## **4.6 Supporting participants to be able to take an active part in the meeting**

***Meetings viewed live and available to view later maybe watched by a large audience and carefully scrutinised by the public including via social media. It is important that these meetings demonstrate good governance and high standards of conduct.***

Meeting policies will need to take account of the need for good conduct and high standards of behaviour. These policies will need to be drafted to closely align with other constitutional provisions on these matters, such as the Code of Conduct.

Principles of good conduct apply to meetings of any kind. However, there will be some issues that are especially relevant for multi-location meetings.

The issues below are especially important:

- People being clear about their roles and the roles that others are playing, either as participants or observers. We cover more on this in the section below;

- Recognising that meeting remotely (and where some, but not all, participants are remote attendees) requires a different approach to the agenda and to behaviour than a meeting in person;
- The need to think carefully about – and plan for – how everyone involved in the meeting will be able to actively contribute;
- Having a clear focus on the actual outcome of the meeting.

Participants are likely to understand that formal committees can often be “performative” – people in a formal meeting behave differently to the way that they would otherwise behave, even if there is no audience. People’s physical presence in the same space has a significant impact on behaviour. Behaviour which might seem normal when everyone is in the council chamber – heckling, applause, the raising of points of order and so on – may feel odd and unusual when all or most people are joining through remote means. Participants in multi-location meetings during 2020 have talked about the “atmosphere” of multi-location meetings being different.

Behaviours in different types of meetings are likely to differ. Decision-making committees will look and feel different to audit or oversight committees, which will feel different from a principal council’s planning and licensing committees. Understanding these differing behaviours will help to inform how multi-location meeting policies are developed, and how they connect to policies around conduct and standards.

This is not just about conduct and behaviour in the narrow sense of the word, but about a shift in mindset about how much work it is possible to do in a multi-location meeting, and how multi-location meetings might help us to plan and carry out work differently.

Research carried out by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny in 2020, and further evidence carried out in preparation for the production of this guidance, highlights the need for a shift in mindset associated with meetings where people join from multiple locations.

- It may be necessary to plan to do less. Meetings where some or all participants join through remote means can run as smoothly as in-person meetings but even after a year of all-remote operation, not everyone is equally familiar with and comfortable with what remains a new way of working. Planning work programmes accordingly will be important;
- Invest in preparation. Later in this guidance we highlight how Chairs may need to carry out planning to understand better what other participants might want to get out of a meeting. This is probably a good habit for all meetings, but will be especially relevant for multi-location ones;

Behaviour, and expectations, around meetings and how business is carried out in those meetings is crucially important in making those meetings effective. Participants in multi-location meetings and others involved in managing and supporting these meetings will have become adept at organising such meetings during the pandemic. The drafting of meeting arrangements and policies provides an opportunity to reflect on how an understanding of behavioural factors needs to be woven into these systems as they reach maturity.

Positive behaviours are also about confidence, which will come from participants being properly supported to play an active and productive role in the meetings in which they are due to take part. Authorities will already have a sense of the support needs of meeting participants, but establishing permanent arrangements for multi-location meetings provides an opportunity to revisit those existing assumptions.

Some of the relevant issues are listed below. These are reproduced, in an amended form, from WLGA guidance issued in early 2020.

- Ensuring that participants have access to appropriate equipment. As a default a desktop PC or laptop with access to a stable broadband connection will be the best way to engage. Participants will need a camera (if they don't have a laptop with an integrated camera) and ideally should use headphones to avoid background noise. Relevant authorities should provide participants who are members of the authority with appropriate equipment if they do not have access to it;
- Ensuring that participants can troubleshoot basic technical problems before or during a meeting – ensuring that they know how to mute and unmute themselves, to activate and disable video, to check their internet connection and so on. There may also be a need to ensure that ICT staff or others are on hand to deal with more serious technical issues;
- Ensuring that participants know how to use the raise, and lower, hand feature, as well as etiquette around muting and unmuting when speaking – the “raise hand” feature may not be usable for those joining on mobile or on a tablet and alternatives may therefore need to be available;
- Use of the chat function, WhatsApp or other messaging platforms. This is covered in more detail in section 4.5;
- Ensuring that names displayed are consistent and accurate, with the role of the individual clearly identified: e.g. “Cllr John Williams – Committee Member” instead of “John’s iPhone” or “jw10881”;
- Ensuring that equipment being used has enough charge or is plugged into the mains;
- Ensuring that participants can view papers easily (we discussed the preparation and presentation of paperwork in more detail in section 4.3); this may include (for example) advice being given to participants on the window snapping function on a Windows device: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/windows/snap-your-windows-885a9b1e-a983-a3b1-16cd-c531795e6241>
- The need for participants to check the environment around them before joining a meeting – checking lighting (recognising the daytime lighting conditions may change over the course of a meeting), background (ensuring that backgrounds are relatively neutral and do not involve the inadvertent display of personal information – the council may provide a corporate background or participants may choose to blur their background) and any visual distractions or noise, with mobiles and onscreen notifications set to silent;
- The need to check personal appearance – formal attire is probably not required but members should probably wear the kind of clothing they would wear if physically present at a meeting;
- Arrangements for preparation – joining the meeting fifteen minutes before it is due to start and checking audio and video arrangements;
- Participants assuming that, for a meeting that is planned to be broadcast, the meeting is being recorded and broadcast for the total time they are on the call.

#### **4.7 Supporting observers (including the public) to access and participate in the meeting**

***While the potential for bigger audiences provides new opportunities for participation, multi-location meetings must ensure arrangements are made for the public to participate via questions and presentations, for example. The presentation of multi-location meetings should also take into account public presence as an audience in new ways.***

The broadcast of meetings will make them more accessible generally – but councils will still need to think of the needs of both observers and participants.

This may include:

- The physical layout of rooms, which will be affected by the requirements around visibility of those joining through remote means;
- How participants joining through remote means will be displayed on a screen or screens in a physical location.

#### Ensuring that observers (including the public) feel welcome

Councils have found over the course of 2020 that the universal use of multi-location meetings has resulted in a significant increase in the number of people viewing meetings.

Generally speaking meetings of authorities will be meetings taking place in public rather than “public meetings”. Members of the public will not have an automatic right to address committees or other bodies – although provision may be made in the constitution for them to do so, in which case observers can become participants.

There will be instances where those people who would otherwise be observers will need to join a meeting as an active participant. This may include:

- Those presenting petitions or deputations;
- Those asking public questions;
- People giving evidence (for example, to scrutiny committees);
- Applicants on regulatory matters (planning and licensing);
- Parties to quasi-judicial matters.

Where individuals are members of the public the Chair or an officer will need to make arrangements to ensure that they can join to participate – and that they are supported in doing so.

Meeting policies may need to make particular provision for this.

#### Making sure that members of the public feel supported when participating through remote means

At a physical meeting, an officer might have an opportunity to speak quietly to a person beforehand to allay any nerves, and to ensure that a person is satisfied with the experience after they have contributed. In a multi-location meeting these “soft” opportunities for conversation and reassurance may not naturally exist. Individuals may find themselves, joining from their own home, on a public call with fifty strangers, being expected to contribute coherently, and then removed from the call without ceremony when the item reaches its conclusion. Clearly, is not ideal. Authorities may wish to explore how members of the public joining meetings in this way can be best supported.

#### Formal meetings which are also public meetings

It is common for authorities to convene formal meetings which are designed to actively involve the public in proceedings.

These meetings might legally be formal meetings but they may have a different character and atmosphere. Authorities should not avoid holding these kinds of meetings because they think that managing them as multi-location meetings will be complex. This also goes for meetings held in places in the community other than an authority’s normal premises, where the presence of technology for broadcast and display may not be immediately present.

Meeting arrangements may make particular reference to and provision for these kinds of meetings.

## Providing for protest and dissent

Authorities may also need to consider how opportunities for public protest and dissent might be provided for in multi-location meetings. This is likely to be particularly relevant for principal councils.

Protest can be inconvenient (and disruptive), but it also reflects a vital public right. Where authorities propose to carry out business by way of multi-location meetings as the norm, and particularly where little to no business for certain bodies may be carried out in person, this feature of the local democratic landscape could be at risk; meeting arrangements should take account of this factor. It will not be appropriate for an authority to decide that it will convene a meeting entirely remotely (with no business being carried out in person) if the principal reason for doing so is because it will eliminate the risk of embarrassment to the authority of a visible, public protest in the vicinity of the meeting.

It is, however, proper for a council to decide that it will convene all meetings so that they can only be accessed through remote means, as long as the accessibility and equality implications of this decision are understood, and as long as the discretion of the authority to make exceptions to these arrangements in particular cases is not fettered.

We noted in section 4.1 the need to make physical arrangements for certain meetings, even those where most participants may be joining through remote means. This may also provide the opportunity for public protest, which could take place in a public gallery, and made visible to those participating through remote means.

This would allow for a protest to be streamed into a meeting otherwise taking place in multiple locations, and could ensure that people protesting in this way feel that their voice has been heard.

## **4.8 Supporting broadcast by members of the public**

***Members of the public or the press may wish to film for immediate or future broadcast some or all of a meeting.***

In the case of multi-location meetings where most or all participants are in the same location, this may involve the separate recording of a broadcast stream for editing and broadcast later.

For meetings where some or all participants attend physically – with physical arrangements made for observers - members of the public and members of the press may wish to use their own equipment for recording and broadcast.

Councils may wish to engage with the local press, and to invite views from the public, as to how their meeting arrangements and policies should take account of the requirement to provide access for this purpose. The way that this works is likely to be different from how councils may have supported this activity when meetings were “all-physical”. This may involve:

- Ensuring that the layout of a room is designed to support video recording (by providing a space from which people might film proceedings without visual obstruction, for example);
- Ensuring that amplification arrangements in a committee room allow proceedings to be adequately recorded by an external microphone, or providing a way for members of the public carrying out recording to take the broadcast audio feed, where relevant;
- Arrangements for shots of the room which include members of the public and others in the audience. Committee meetings occur in public and those attending do not have an automatic expectation of privacy or the right to object to recording, but there may be circumstances in which councils want to think about how they will ensure that those carrying out recording are focusing on the formal proceedings;

- Arrangements for video and audio recording of the recorder's own narrative and of two-way interviews with participants within the committee room; members of the press in particular may want to film interviews, pieces to camera and establishing shots of the space in which the meeting takes place, and arrangements should be in place to support this before and after the meeting, and to ensure that those attending are aware that this may be happening.

This is not an exhaustive list.

## 4.9 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 job of the Chair will be a particular challenge where a meeting is being carried out in a physical space with only some participants joining through remote means.***

The following general principles for chairing meetings in this context are reproduced and amended, from WLGA guidance issued in spring 2020, and incorporate guidance produced by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny for both English and Welsh councils at the same time.

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. This may involve the Chair consulting with officers, and other committee members, to determine:

- What the meeting is about, and the possible purpose and outcomes for every item on that meeting's agenda;
- What information and paperwork will need to be made available in order for these outcomes to be delivered;
- Where councillors or other meeting participants will want to contribute – and where and how public participation might need to be facilitated;
- Where these people might need particular support in order to participate in the way that they want.

Chairs will also need to engage with all participants (which may include external witnesses and members of the public or others with a role to play) to ensure that their role and means of involvement are well understood. This is covered in more detail in section 4.7.

Chairs should:

- Think about the accessibility of the meeting to the public, and whether there are any things they can do that will ensure that public observers are welcomed and that business is explained in a way that is understandable, including the operation of the multi-location meeting itself;
- Ensure that they are prepared for the meeting in a logistical sense by being aware of which councillors and other participants may be joining by remote means. If the Chair themselves is joining by remote means while some other participants are present in a committee room particular steps will need to be taken to prepare, which are set out in section 4.1;
- Ensure before the start of the meeting that everyone is able to access people, and that everyone is able to both see and hear each other (where the law requires it for specific meetings) or hear each other (for other formal meetings);
- Provide a reminder of meeting arrangements and policies, particularly relating to conduct and behaviour, including some of the material set out in section 4.6 above. This may (depending on the meeting) involve advice on voting arrangements;



- At the beginning of the meeting, introduce themselves, the committee, officers present and other participants to ensure that those watching or listening to a broadcast are aware who is who;
- To 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 (as we explore further in section 4.6)
- Check occasionally through the meeting that no one has been ‘lost’ due to technical issues, and provide support to councillors experiencing challenges – in this Chairs may need the support of support officers
- Pay more attention than usual to framing the meeting with reminders of the purpose of each agenda item and summarising decisions and actions for each item and again at the end of the meeting.
- Check at the end of each agenda item that all members are content that they have been able to contribute, and ensure that agreed voting arrangements are followed where relevant.

The “balance” between individuals in a room, and those joining by remote means, will have a significant effect on how business will be transacted. This links back to the points we made in the earlier section on conduct and behaviour. Chairs and their support officers are likely to need to know ahead of time which members to attend physically and which may join by remote means. For meetings with a mix of arrangements – particularly if the Chair themselves will be joining by remote means – planning is likely to be necessary. This may include:

- Understanding the motivations and objectives of individual participants on specific agendas items, and having a sense of what they may want to say and ask;
- Identifying how a support officer or other member may bring their attention to a member wishing to make a comment through remote means or in the committee room (it will otherwise be challenging for a Chair to maintain awareness of those in the room as well as those joining remotely);
- Planning debate to be themed or otherwise structured rather than inviting comments generally, to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute;
- Briefing witnesses on expectations;
- Ensuring that reports reflect the above sets of circumstances.

This kind of planning will benefit any meeting, not just those with a mix of in-person and remote attendance.

## **4.10 The taking of votes**

***Multi-location meetings provide additional challenges in terms of capturing votes. Chosen options will depend on the chosen platform and local preferences.***

Participants in a formal meeting may decide to do something through general consent, or through a recorded vote. Immediately before the vote the Chair will need to determine that all members of the body continue to be “present”, as we set out in section 4.4.

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

- A verbal roll call of those participants entitled to vote (“voters”). Particularly for full Councils, this process has been found to be the most rigorous but can be very time consuming, especially if amendments to motions are put to the vote;
- Using the ‘raise hand’ function, although this is subject to misinterpretation and human error;
- Responses via the chat;
- Dedicated voting software incorporated into the platform.

The authority will want to ensure that:

- All voters have the same opportunity to vote;
- All voters vote through the same process. In some council chambers, facilities for the taking and recording of votes may be present, but those joining through remote means may not be able to participate in the use of this in-situ technology. Authorities with this technology will need to think carefully about whether, and how, such facilities might extend into the remote space, or how systems used for remote voting might extend into the physical space;
- A suitable record of the vote is captured by the appropriate officer and is confirmed in a way that is understandable to those observing the meeting.

#### Bodies reaching resolutions without a vote

It is common that committees or other bodies may resolve to take certain action without a vote being recorded. In person, the Chair is able to get a sense of whether consensus exists by looking around the room. Those present have the opportunity to object and to press for a vote, depending on the authority's standing orders.

Where participants are joining through remote means (and particularly where some members join through remote means and some are present physically) the Chair will need to special care to ensure that consent is present to move on without a vote.

### **4.11 Training, peer support and good practice sharing**

***The arrangements for multi-location meetings are new and will continue to evolve. This makes it particularly important to ensure that councillors and officer have access to good quality training, peer support and good practice sharing.***

Those participating in multi-location meetings and those expecting to participate should be offered initial, and top-up, training, development and support to ensure an understanding of these issues. This is not the same as training to support the technical use of ICT equipment.