

MULTI-LOCATION MEETING POLICY

LEADER (COUNCILLOR HUW THOMAS)

AGENDA ITEM: 3

Reason for this Report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek Cabinet approval of the Council's Multi-Location Meetings Policy.

Background

2. 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 the Council convened meetings by remote means throughout 2020 and part of 2021.
3. Experience of operating meetings under the Covid Meeting Regulations provided the Council with expertise in understanding and managing remote attendance meetings. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 placed remote meeting arrangements onto a new permanent statutory footing. The provisions in the 2021 Act can be seen as an evolution of the prior arrangements.
4. A report on the new legislative requirements for remote / multi-location meeting arrangements was considered by Council in May 2021. Council agreed to extend the temporary remote meeting attendance arrangements established under the Covid Meeting Regulations, and ask the Constitution Committee to consider permanent arrangements, in accordance with the new legislative requirements, for approval by Council.
5. The Constitution Committee has duly considered reports on Multi-Location Meeting Arrangements at its meetings in June 2021, December 2021 and 28 February 2022. This report sets out the recommendations of the Constitution Committee.

Issues

6. Under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, local authorities are required to put in place, and publish, arrangements for multi-location meetings, that is, arrangements to ensure that all Council, Cabinet,

Committee, Sub-Committee and Joint Committee meetings may be attended remotely by persons who are not in the same place.

7. The Guidance states that ‘meeting arrangements’ are the rules and procedures adopted by the local authority in accordance with the statutory requirements, and should be reflected in the Council’s Constitution, as appropriate (Statutory Guidance, point 1.3).
8. In accordance with its approved terms of reference, the Constitution Committee has considered the amendments to be made to the meeting procedure rules set out in the Constitution. The recommended Constitution amendments are to be submitted to full Council for approval in March 2022.
9. Alongside the legally mandated arrangements that authorities must make for multi-location meetings, the statutory 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. (Guidance section 4)
10. To progress this matter, an initial draft of a Multi-Location Meetings Policy was considered by the Constitution Committee on 13 December 2021; and again on 28 February 2022, when a revised draft was considered following a period of consultation.
11. The draft policy takes account of the interim statutory guidance, which sets out a number of guiding principles to be considered in developing multi-location meeting arrangements, as well as practical considerations. The guidance also lists suggested issues to be included in the policy, but indicates that the exact contents of the policy will be agreed at local level.

Benefits and Challenges of Multi-location meetings

12. The benefits of multi-location meetings are identified in the guidance and have been included in the draft policy but no specific challenges were identified. The following benefits and challenges are considered relevant to balance the policy:
 - a. Benefits:

Cardiff Council has been convening a majority of its 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.

 - (i) Enhancing and supporting local democracy by demonstrating this Council conducting its business:

Having the flexibility to convene meetings remotely has improved the understanding of the decision-making processes for participants and observers compared to what they may have previously experienced. The Chairs of Committees have enhanced their explanations of how the committee carries out its

business particularly when attendees or observers are not present in a physical meeting.

- (ii) Making it easier for the public to observe Multi-location meetings.
The number and viewership of Cardiff's webcast meetings has increased significantly since 2019 when the authority received a total of 7937 views. This increased to 14077 views in 2020 and this further increased in 2021 to 17131 views.
- (iii) Enabling external participants to actively engage at meetings to provide a greater range of views and to enhance decision making.
Multi-location meetings have made it possible to actively encourage external participants to attend meetings ensuring that committees can benefit from a greater range of views. The Scrutiny Committees have seen an increase in the number of external participants from organisations including Sport Wales, Natural Resources Wales and others stakeholders.
- (iv) Making the authority more resilient and sustainable.
The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires the Council to think about, and act on, long term needs in the way that policy is developed and made. Multi-location meetings have reduced the carbon footprint of physical meetings by negating the need to travel across the city or region to attend a physical meeting. The ability to hold multi-location meetings will also reduce the risk of future unexpected events – such as extreme weather – which could present a challenge to in-person meetings.
- (v) Reducing the need for travel.
For Joint Committees supported by Cardiff Council with representatives from across the region, significant time and cost savings for councillors, officers and other participants have arisen. This also makes it easier for participants to take part if they have professional and caring commitments.
- (vi) It is easier for participants to take part if they have professional and caring commitments.
A significant number of Elected Members also have careers or are carers. Since the implementation of multi-location meetings, attendance levels have increased. One of the factors for this increase is that remote meetings do not require participants to seek additional time off from work or to arrange extended cover for their caring responsibilities to allow for travelling to the meeting venue.
- (vii) Better support for members from diverse backgrounds.
Multi-location meetings making it easier for care providers, or disabled people, or people with other protected characteristics, to engage on an equal footing.

(viii) Better behaviours.

Although experiences have been mixed, on the whole meeting management and the behaviours of participants have both improved, with less heckling taking place at meetings.

b. Challenges:

- (i) Suitable technology – before 2020, there was little or no technology other than basic video conferencing and webcasting. The rapid development of remote working technology during the coronavirus pandemic made basic remote meetings possible. The complexity of equipment and software necessary to deliver public multi-location meetings requires a significant further step-change in technology.
- (ii) Reliance on the internet – Participants involved in remote meetings are reliant on having a suitable internet connection to join and maintain their presence in this type of meeting.
- (iii) Cultural change – significant progress was made by the authority, its Elected Members and public participants in adapting to remote meetings during the coronavirus pandemic. The development of multi-location meetings provides a significant cultural challenge from the existing processes for all those involved in the decision-making processes of the Council.
- (iv) Accessibility and Security – the wide scale accessibility requirements of multi-location meetings facilities also needs to address the security of information and of meetings particularly when meetings can be recorded and broadcast.
- (v) Involvement and participation – The level of interest in local government decision-making is low and usually limited to those issues which have a specific personal impact. Whilst the pandemic provided an opportunity to increase the level of observers at meetings, it is uncertain whether this will continue as the pandemic eases. Encouraging the public to become involved in the wider decision-making issues facing the Council will be an ongoing challenge.

Meeting locations and Equipment

13. The Council is in the process of procuring a new conference system which will better enable the requirements of multi-location meetings to be met. This includes: microphones, cameras, display screens, simultaneous translation equipment, audio enhancement and facilities for the hard of hearing. To coordinate all of the systems, meeting management software will integrate both remote and physical participants into single common functionality to provide: requests to speak, speaker queues, electronic voting, vote results and a dual-language remote meeting facility.

14. This equipment will be installed in three primary venues, the City Hall and County Hall Council Chambers and Committee Room 4 in County Hall and will integrate with the existing webcasting equipment. Following implementation of the new conferencing systems, further development will be undertaken to widen the range of venues and equipment to support multi-location meetings with a physical focus in locations across the city. This may require additional equipment and other resources to further enhance the planned conferencing system.
15. Zoom software has been procured following receipt of a Welsh Government grant from the Digital Democracy Fund. The use of this software will need to be developed for formal public meetings to provide simultaneous translation facilities for remote meetings.
16. ICT Equipment is provided for Elected Members to enable them to access remote multi-location meetings. This ICT equipment will be refreshed following the 2022 Local Government Elections
17. It should be noted that the rapid development of software, equipment and the processes to deliver multi-location meeting may require the policy and any associated guidance and documents to be updated.

Determination of meeting types

18. The WG guidance says:
'A multi-location meetings policy may make provision that different kinds of meeting be convened, by default, with all participants joining through remote means, or with some arrangement being made for people to attend and participate and observe in person. Policies should recognise that the Act requires participants to be able to join meetings through remote means for all formal meetings. It will not be permitted for relevant authorities to decide that all meetings will be held entirely physically.' (Guidance point 4.1)
19. Physical meetings should not be seen as representing the "gold standard" with multi-location meetings being second best. Physical meetings may be convenient and effective for those most familiar with and comfortable with how they work – but they may also be inaccessible and impractical to many.

Predominantly Remote Meetings

20. Cardiff Council administers both the Glamorgan Archives and Prosiect Gwyrdd Joint Committees. Given the challenges of travelling significant distances across the region and the need to ensure maximum participation, these meetings have been initially identified as "predominantly remote meetings". This would also support the intentions of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and One Planet Cardiff, by helping to reduce the carbon footprint of holding these meetings. Remote meetings can also help the Authority to reduce the risk of future unexpected events such as extreme weather.
21. During the consultation a number of the respondents from these joint committees identified a preference for predominantly remote meetings. In

addition, members of the Local Authority Governor Panel also expressed a preference for holding their meetings as predominantly remote meetings.

22. This does not preclude participants meeting physically but this will require any of the physical attendees to attend the designated meeting venue as outlined in paragraph 13 above. Opportunities for using meetings venues in other Local Authority areas will be dependent on the other venues having compatible multi-location meeting equipment.

Multi-location Meetings

23. All Council, Cabinet, committee, sub-committee and joint committee meetings must be able to operate as multi-location meetings and ensure that participants are able to attend remotely. The policy identifies opportunities for each decision-making body to collectively agree the number of their meetings which are to be held predominantly physically or predominantly remotely during each municipal year.
24. During the consultation, several elected and other members acknowledged that the requirement for individuals to attend meetings in person cannot be mandated. Some consultees expressed their concerns about the effectiveness of the democratic process in decision making with multi-location meetings and suggested that sitting around a table offers an opportunity to 'read the room', confirm that all views have been captured, and encourage contributions from all participants.
25. The consultation responses indicated that there will be Committee Members who may not physically meet, and that there is a need to ensure effective Committee relationships and to develop the collective cohesion of all committee members.
26. Whilst physical attendance cannot be mandated there are no general restrictions for meeting participants determining themselves to physically attend any or all meetings. However, local arrangements may require a limitation on the number of participants physically attending meetings e.g compliance with social distancing rules.

Predominantly Physical meetings

27. Experience has identified that some meetings may be better suited to having a higher level of physical attendance. However, this does not preclude some or all participants attending these meetings remotely if they wish or if there are overriding reasons for doing so. These meetings may include:
 - a. Appointments Committees
 - b. Council Appeals Committee
 - c. Licensing Sub Committee
 - d. Public Protection Sub Committee
 - e. Standard and Ethics Sub Committee (Hearings Panel)

28. The consultation did not identify any challenge to holding these committees and panels as predominantly physical meeting.

Webcasting of Meetings

29. Under the 2021 Act, full Council meetings must be electronically broadcast, with effect from 5 May 2022. As Members will be aware, full Council meetings in Cardiff are already webcast and available to view live on the Council's website. (Members may wish to note that the requirement to broadcast meetings may be extended to other local authority meetings by Regulations issued by the Welsh Ministers.)
30. The Council currently has a webcasting contract of 200 hours per year and this provides sufficient time to support the following committees:
- a. Council
 - b. Cabinet
 - c. Planning Committee
 - d. Governance and Audit Committee
 - e. All Scrutiny Committees
 - f. Standards and Ethics Committee
31. Where resources allow, other meetings with a significant public interest can be webcast. However, if the requirement to webcast increases to include other committees, additional funding will be necessary to support any change in the requirement.

Engagement with Participants

32. The guidance indicates that decisions about local democracy and the best approaches to promote and encourage engagement in local democratic systems are best made at a local level. Therefore, the policy will be aligned with the Council's public participation obligations under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, to provide an understanding of the specific needs of a wide range of local people.
33. To support the development and implementation of the multi-location meetings policy, engagement and consultation with Elected Members and other meeting participants has been undertaken. This included workshops with Elected, Independent and co-opted Members, and Committee Support Officers.
34. The Corporate Research Team in liaison with the Head of Democratic Services developed a public survey which was circulated to:
- a. the Citizens Panel with approximately 5,500 public representatives
 - b. the Youth Council
 - c. Community Councils
 - d. Various equality Groups identified by the Equalities Team which included:
 - Cardiff 3rd Sector Network

- Race Equality First
- Diverse Cymru
- Cardiff 50+ Forum
- Guide Dogs Cymru
- Disability Wales
- Alzheimer's Society
- Age Connects (Cardiff and the Vale)
- Royal National Institute for the Blind
- Wales Council for the Deaf
- Deaf Hub Wales
- British Deaf Association
- Cardiff Councils 5 Employee Networks
 - Black Asian and Minority Ethnic,
 - Carers,
 - Disability,
 - LGBT+ and
 - Women's
- Cardiff East Interfaith Network

e. The residents of Cardiff with a public survey promoted on the Councils social media accounts.

35. This has assisted in the development and completion of an Equalities Impact Assessment attached at **Appendix A**, which reflects the responses received as part of the consultation.
36. It is generally considered that the move to multi-location meetings will result in having a positive impact on all equality groups. There are benefits for those who do not have to attend the meeting in person particularly those with disabilities or other responsibilities which make attending a physical meeting challenging. Others who may be digitally excluded will be able to attend the physical meeting and benefit from the available facilities that will be provided including audio enhancement for the hard of hearing.

Implementation of the Policy

37. To optimise the benefits which the policy is intended to achieve, its implementation has been scheduled for 5 May 2022. This will enable the new conferencing system to be installed and all members elected in the Local Government Elections in 2022 to be trained in the use of the new technology and systems including how they can effectively participate in physical and remote meetings.

Documentation

38. The WG Guidance identifies the importance of ensuring that participants and observers have access to easy-to-understand information which explains how they can and should engage in multi-location meetings. To minimise changes to the policy once it is approved, it is proposed that

guidance documents be published separately with reference made to them in the main policy document.

39. Once approved, the Multi-Location Meetings Policy, along with Guidelines for Public Participants and Observers of Multi-location Meetings will be published on the Council's website with a simple explanation of the arrangements for the casual reader. Internal guidance for "Council Participants and Observers at Multi-location Meetings" and "Chairing Multi-location Meetings" will be made available on the Council's Intranet.
40. With the imminent implementation of the Council's new conferencing system and meeting software, the guidance which is expected to complement this policy will be prepared based on the new technology and systems.

Review of the Policy

41. It is proposed that a review of the policy be undertaken after 12 months from the implementation of the Multi-location Meetings policy.
42. This project is already on the Governance and Legal Directorate Risk Register and to support the implementation and subsequent review of the policy, the key concerns identified during the consultation will be reflected and monitored in the Directorate Risk Register.

Progressing the multi-location meetings arrangements

43. The Constitution Committee has considered the draft Multi Locations Meeting Policy attached **at Appendix B** and recommended this policy to the Cabinet for approval.
44. The Constitution Committee has identified necessary changes to the Constitution which if this policy is approved by Cabinet, will be recommended to Council for approval.

Local Member consultation

45. All Elected, Independent and Co-opted members were consulted.

Reason for Recommendations

46. The reasons for recommendations are to:
 - a. meet the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021,
 - b. deliver effective multi-location meetings for the Authority, its Elected Members and the residents of the city of Cardiff and
 - c. to enhance the participation and observation of the Council's decision-making processes at its meetings.

Financial Implications

47. There is funding in place for the Council's new conferencing system, which will be financed through the Council's Capital Programme.
48. The Council has an ongoing contract with a supplier for Webcasting of meetings until 31st March 2023, costs are to be met from the Democratic Services budgets.
49. Following the 2022 Local Government election an exercise will be undertaken by officials to identify the cost of new ICT equipment for Elected Members and the identified costs will be funded through earmarked reserves.

Legal Implications

50. 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, Cabinet, Committee, Sub-Committee and Joint Committee meetings may be attended remotely (i.e. enabling persons who are not in the same place to attend the meeting) – also referred to as 'multi-location meetings'.
51. 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).
52. 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.
53. The 2021 Act makes 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.)
54. The 2021 Act also introduces a new duty on local authorities, with effect from 5 May 2022, to encourage local people to participate in their decision making and to prepare and publish a public participation strategy detailing how it will meet this duty.

55. When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers: [Interim statutory guidance on multi-location meetings \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)
56. The statutory 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 of the guidance. 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.
57. When public consultation is undertaken, case law has established that the consultation process should:
- (i) be undertaken when proposals are still at a formative stage;
 - (ii) include sufficient reasons and information for particular proposals to enable intelligent consideration and response;
 - (iii) provide adequate time for consideration and response; and;
 - (iv) ensure that the product of consultation is conscientiously taken into account when the ultimate decision is taken.
58. In considering this matter, the Council must have regard to its public sector equality duties under the Equality Act 2010 (including specific Welsh public sector duties). Pursuant to these legal duties, Councils must in making decisions have due regard to the need to (1) eliminate unlawful discrimination, (2) advance equality of opportunity and (3) foster good relations on the basis of protected characteristics. The Protected characteristics are: age, gender reassignment, sex, race – including ethnic or national origin, colour or nationality, disability, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, sexual orientation, religion or belief – including lack of belief. When taking strategic decisions, the Council also has a statutory duty to have due regard to the need to reduce inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic disadvantage ('the Socio-Economic Duty' imposed under section 1 of the Equality Act 2010). In considering this, the Council must take into account the statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers and must be able to demonstrate how it has discharged its duty. An Equalities Impact Assessment should be carried out to identify the equalities implications of the proposed arrangements, including inequalities arising from socio-economic disadvantage, and due regard should be given to the outcomes of the Equalities Impact Assessment.
59. The Council must also be mindful of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Welsh Language Standards and consider the impact of its arrangements upon the Welsh language.
60. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires the Council to consider how its proposals will contribute towards meeting its well being objectives (set out in the Corporate Plan). Members must also be satisfied that the proposals comply with the sustainable development

principle, which requires that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

61. The approval of any policy which does not form part of the Council's policy framework (as defined in the Constitution, Article 4.2(a)) is a function reserved to the Cabinet under the Scheme of Delegations, Section 2, paragraph 4.

HR Implications

62. There are no HR implications

Property Implications

63. Plans are in place for the installation of the Councils Conferencing system into the City Hall and County Hall Council Chambers and Committee Room 4 in County Hall. Once the installation is complete in Committee Room 4 will become a designated Multi-Location Meeting room and its use will be co-ordinated via Democratic Services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Cabinet is recommended to:

- (1) approve and adopt the draft Multi-Location Meetings Policy (Appendix B), subject to any agreed changes, with effect from 5 May 2022;
- (2) authorise the Director of Governance and Legal Services to make any minor changes which may be required for the effective operation of the policy and Cardiff's multi-location meetings arrangements;
- (3) Note that the approved Multi-Location Meetings Policy and supporting guidance documents (referred to in paragraph 39 of the report) are to be published on the Council's website; and
- (4) review the Multi-Location Meetings Policy after 12 months from its implementation.

SENIOR RESPONSIBLE OFFICER	Davina Fiore Director of Governance & Legal Services
	4 March 2022

The following appendices are attached:

Appendix A –Equality Impact Assessment – Multi-Location Meetings
Appendix B – Multi-Location Meetings Policy

The following background papers have been taken into account:

[Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Act 2021](#)

[‘Remote / Multi-Location Meeting Arrangements’](#), report to Council dated 27 May 2021

[Interim statutory guidance on multi-location meetings](#) dated May 2021.

[Multi-Location Meeting Arrangements Report](#) to Constitution Committee dated 13 December 2021

Multi-Location Meeting Arrangements Report to Constitution Committee dated 28 February 2022