

Multi-Location Meetings Policy City and County of Swansea - 2022

Background

1. At the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 provided a framework for Councils to convene remote meetings for all attendees whilst face to face meetings were unable to take place.
2. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 has enabled Councils to continue to meet remotely with the introduction of multi-location meetings enabling greater public participation and Councillor involvement in decision making.
3. During Covid lockdowns and throughout 2020/21 Swansea Council has been convening its meetings by remote means resulting in a number of benefits:
 - Allowing decisions to be made in a transparent way.
 - Making it easy for the public to view and participate in decision making and the democratic process.
 - Enabling external participants to engage in meetings.
 - Compliance with the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in terms of making the authority more sustainable and resilient. Multi-location meetings reduce the carbon footprint of physical meetings. They also reduce both the reliance on paper and reduce the need for travel.
 - Significant time and cost savings for councillors and officers particularly in relation to regional arrangements.
 - It is easier for participants to take part if they have family and/or caring commitments.

Legal Provisions

4. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 provides that Councils are required to:
 - a) Electronically broadcast meetings (with effect from May 2022).
 - b) 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’.

- Meetings must be capable of being held virtually, but each authority must decide whether their meetings will be held fully virtually, partially virtually (where some participants are in the same physical location, whilst others join the meeting virtually, also referred to as 'hybrid meetings') or as physical meetings (authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings).
 - Participants in the meetings must be able to speak to and hear each other; and for meetings which are required to be broadcast (full Council meetings), participants must also be able to see and be seen by each other.
- c) Publish all meeting documents on the Council's website, including notices, summonses, agendas, reports and background papers.
- A note of the meeting, including Members in attendance and decisions made, must be published within 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.
 - 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.
4. When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to the statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Ministers: Interim statutory guidance on multi-location meetings <https://gov.wales/local-authority-multi-location-meetings-interim-guidance>
5. 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. The guidance confirms the meeting arrangements should be reflected in the procedure rules set out in the constitution.
6. The statutory guidance also stipulates that authorities should develop a policy setting out in how the multi-location meetings will operate and reflect the meeting arrangements in the constitution.

What is a Multi-Location Meeting?

7. A Multi-Location Meeting is a meeting whose participants are not all in the same physical place. Some of the participants may be physically located in the meeting venue whilst others join from their home or other remote location.

Multi-Location Meetings Determination

8. The Welsh Government Statutory Guidance stipulates that local democracy and the needs of the public in engaging with multi-location meetings are an important consideration in deciding where and when meetings will be convened.
9. It is also acknowledged that some participants may have a preference for physical meetings due to protected characteristics or circumstances which limits their ability to participate online. Some participants however may wish to join council meetings remotely and from another location as a matter of default because they have working or caring responsibilities, protected characteristics, which make attending meetings in person difficult.
10. In addition to Council and Cabinet meetings the Council has a variety of committees and sub-committees which support its statutory, regulatory and governance arrangements. There is also a joint committee which involve a number of other Local Authorities and which are administered by the Swansea Democratic Services Team.
11. Both the Council Chamber and the newly refurbished Gloucester Room have multi-location meeting capability which will enable participants to be able to attend both remotely and in person. Both the Chamber and the Gloucester Room have designated public galleries to allow the public to attend in person.
12. The Council has determined that all meetings must be able to operate as multi-location meetings to ensure that participants are able to attend remotely or physically should they wish to do so. All Committees may be viewed at: www.swansea.gov.uk/committees

Use of Cameras

13. Participants of meetings that are broadcast must be able to “speak to and be heard by each other” and “to see and be seen by each other”.
14. The ability to see and be seen predominantly applies when a participant is speaking, although for some meetings, participants attending remotely may also be required to ensure that their cameras remain on for the duration of the meeting, for example, quasi-judicial meetings such as Planning and Licensing Committee. For other meetings the Chair may use their discretion whether participants are to keep their cameras on when not speaking.
15. It is inevitable that there will be occasions when a remote participant may need to disable their camera due to poor connection/internet issues. If this occurs the participant should use the chat function to inform the meeting Chair and democratic services staff of the issue.

Health & Safety of Participants

16. Attendance at multi-location meetings may require participants and observers to use display screen equipment or to be seated for extended periods of time. To negate any adverse impacts from attending multi-location meetings remotely, participants will be requested to undertake a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) self-assessment to ensure that the configuration of their equipment meets health and safety requirements.
17. The Chair should consider the need for appropriate breaks as part of the agenda management arrangements of the meeting.

Calendar of Meetings

18. A programme of meetings will be developed annually which identifies when, where and how each of the Council's meetings will be held. This may be subject to change during the year for operational reasons.
19. The programme of meetings will avoid wherever possible scheduling meetings to be held simultaneously or immediately following another meeting. If this cannot be avoided the relevant Chairs will be consulted and one of the meetings will be undertaken as a fully remote meeting.

Attendance at Meetings

20. Invitations to meetings will be provided electronically and will provide details of the meeting, its location and timings. It will include links to enable the participants to join remotely should they wish to do so. On receipt of the invitation, participants will be requested to indicate their intentions to attend the meeting physically or remotely to enable any necessary administrative and support arrangements to be put in place by Democratic Services.
23. Those participants considering attending the meeting remotely should also ensure that they have appropriate internet connectivity to join and maintain their attendance throughout the meeting.
24. All committee members are encouraged to physically attend at least one meeting of each committee or decision-making body to which they are appointed during each municipal year. Although physical attendance of participants cannot be mandated, there is no restriction on participants should they wish to physically attend any or all meetings.

25. On occasions the number of physical attendees who may be present at each meeting may be limited. In this event the Chair of the meeting together with essential officers will be given priority for attendance. Priority will also be given to external participants who may also need to attend the physical meeting in order to participate. Any remaining spaces are allocated to the political groups in accordance with political balance rules. The political groups are expected to give priority to any members who have difficulties joining a meeting remotely.
26. Meetings are also attended by a range of participants other than committee members. Officers and committee members should notify Democratic Services of additional participants who will be attending with details and contact information of the participant. The external participants will be contacted by Democratic Services to confirm their attendance, explain how they can join the meeting either as a physical or remote participant and the meeting procedures. If the external participant is joining the meeting remotely an electronic meeting invitation similar to that of other participants will be sent. They will also be offered the opportunity of a test meeting to familiarise themselves with the technology and the arrangements that are in place.
27. Members of the public will also be able to attend physical meetings from the public gallery in both the Gloucester Room and the Council Chamber. In the event that the number of members of the public needs to be limited i.e. social distancing then seats will be allocated on a first come first served basis. Members of the public who wish to view a meeting which is to be fully remote should make a request to the Head of Democratic Services, submitted by noon the previous working day prior to the remote meeting, to enable arrangements to be made.

Recording of Meetings by Others

27. Members of the public are permitted to photograph, film or record Councillors and officers and use social media at any Council meetings that are open to the public and press, as long as they have given advance notice to the Head of Democratic Services. This is so that everyone attending the meeting is made aware that they may be recorded and that by attending the meeting they are deemed to consent to this. The Chair has discretion to prohibit recording and/or exclude from the meeting anyone reasonably considered to be in breach of the rules.
28. There is to be no recording or transmission of proceedings dealing with any exempt or confidential information.

Record of Attendance

29. The Democratic Services Officer will record attendance of each committee member and participant at the meeting and record attendance in the minutes of the meeting. Committee Members are to inform the relevant Democratic Services if they are unable to attend a meeting and their apologies will be recorded at the meeting, and published in the minutes of the meeting.

Broadcasting Meetings

30. Formal meetings of the Council will either be webcast by being streamed live or recorded for subsequent upload to the Council's webcasting website within 2 working days of the end of the meeting.
31. Where a meeting is being webcast notification will be given on the agenda pack and at the start of the meeting. Signs will be placed in the Chamber and the Gloucester Room to make clear that recording is taking place. The Chair of the meeting will have discretion to terminate or suspend the webcast in appropriate circumstances and will ensure no exempt or confidential agenda items will be webcast. The Monitoring Officer in consultation with the Chief Executive may request removal of the webcast, or certain parts of the webcast, where considered necessary.

Consideration of Exempt or Confidential Information at Meetings

32. On occasions the Committee will be asked to exclude the public when considering exempt or confidential information. The agenda will schedule exempt items at the end of the meeting, so as to minimise any inconvenience to observers who will be required to leave the meeting when the item is being discussed.
33. When an exempt item is being considered the Democratic Services officer will ensure that members of the public have left the meeting, either remotely or physically and will turn off the recording equipment and webcast.
34. When the committee has considered the exempt item and if there are further public items to be considered, all remote participants will be invited to re-join the public meeting and the recording and webcast will be resumed. The observers or participants attending the physical meeting will be invited to return into the committee room.

Voting

35. It is acknowledged that technical issues may dictate the method of voting but voting will comply with the voting rules set out in the Council Procedure Rules. Methods of voting include electronic voting, a roll call vote and show of hands (either physical or virtual). Committee members should ensure that they have

been present for the discussion and debate on agenda items so as to be able to exercise their vote.

36. The result of any vote will be announced immediately following the vote by either the Chair or the Democratic Services Officer.

Chairing Meetings

37. The Statutory Guidance understands that chairing a multi-location meeting is very different to chairing a face-to-face meeting. The job of the Chair is particularly challenging at a physical meeting with some participants joining remotely. Chairs and vice-chairs are encouraged to attend meetings in person in order to benefit from the direct support of the Democratic Services officer and legal officer.

38. In general Chairs of meetings should:

- Ensure they are prepared for the meeting.
- Ensure all participants are able to access the meeting and can see and hear each other.
- Introduce themselves and others to members of the public who may be present.
- Check occasionally to ensure no one has been lost due to technical difficulties and provide support to those participants experiencing challenges.
- Ensure all participants are given an opportunity to speak and appropriately use the chat facility.

Chat Function Use

39. The chat function provides a simple method of enabling the chair to manage the meeting and to enable the remote participants to communicate with the chair.

40. The chat function should be used to:

- Allow advice to be given.
- Allow the Chair to respond to queries from members and acknowledge requests to contribute to discussion.
- Allow the Chair to check with a participant as to whether they are still present.
- Enable participants to advise as to technical difficulties.

41. The chat function should not be used:

- For personal communications with other participants.

- As substantial conversation and thereby detracting from main discussion.
- For general chit-chat, jokes or political comments.