COVID-19 Outbreak

Remote Attendance at Meetings

A Guide for Councillors

July 2020

Introduction

Since the start of the Covid impacted period, Welsh Councils have been working hard to maintain effective governance arrangements. These include new arrangements for holding meetings remotely enabled by new meeting regulations issued by the Welsh Government. The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) regulations 2020 came into force on the 22nd April 2020. The regulations and a statement from the Minister can be found here. The Welsh Government have now issued further regulations about remote meetings. here which address some of the minor or technical matters relating to the April regulations.

The Regulations apply to Principal Councils, Community Councils, National Park Authorities, Fire and Rescue Authorities and the Swansea Bay Port Health Authority. There is an expectation from the Welsh Government that councils will use this enabling legislation to return to conducting their business remotely as soon as possible.

Monitoring officers and Democratic Services leads will be able to provide members with more detailed information about these regulations and how these apply and are being implemented locally. Broadly however the regulations set out the following:

Remote attendance

All members can remotely participate in meetings. This applies to meetings held before 1st May 2021. Audio participation is all that is required. Members should be able to speak and be heard by each other. This flexibility means that councils have been able to reintroduce meetings focussed on urgent business relating to Covid 19 and are phasing in a full range of functions over the coming months.

AGMs

If a council has not held an AGM on or after the 1st March or before the 22nd April 2020 then the AGM can be held on any date in 2020. Most of the authorities who did not hold an AGM prior to the lockdown period are planning for an AGM in the Autumn.

Other meetings

Other meetings that would normally be required to be held at specific times in the council calendar can now be held at any time before May 1st, 2021.

Attendance at meetings (The "Six Month Rule")

The rule that disqualifies members for failing to attend a meeting in a six-month period is suspended as of April 22nd, 2020. The time counted will restart from when a member would be expected to attend a meeting after the Covid impacted period.

Election of chairs

If a new council or committee chair (or similar position such as vice chair, representative on an outside body) has not been elected at an AGM held prior to the 22nd April 2020, then the existing chair can remain in office until 1st May 2021.

Summonses to meetings

Members can now be summoned to meetings through electronic communication.

Public attendance

Although it will not always be practicable, public viewing or listening of any meetings should be arranged wherever possible.

Where the public are to be invited this should happen electronically 3 clear days before the meeting is due to be held. Or, if the meeting is called at short notice, as soon as reasonably practicable.

Meeting papers

A note of meeting proceedings should be published electronically within 5 days of the meeting being held. This note should include a list of attendees, declarations of interest, any decisions taken (except exempt items) and the outcomes of any votes.

Executive decisions

When a decision is taken by the Executive or individual executive members, any written statements or reports relating to the decision should be published on the council website.

Planning

Members on planning committees can now be substituted.

Many councils have already agreed urgent delegations to leaders, cabinets, and senior officers in their constitutions, to deal with the ongoing emergency. Although the new regulations will allow greater flexibility around managing council business, councils' resources and staff have been refocused and reprioritised to respond to the Coronavirus pandemic. Members should therefore bear in mind that meetings are only likely to be held to take decisions on urgent and business critical issues until the pandemic subsides. Council staff, including democratic, scrutiny and committee services staff may have been redeployed to help support front-line services, so research and reports will be limited and will have to be prioritised according to business need.

Different councils will use different meeting technologies and will be able to guide members in its use. The LGA has published Information about the range of meeting software here. Councils are now also continuing to or introducing broadcasting arrangements so that meetings can be viewed on council websites as, or shortly after, they happen.

The Welsh Government continue to work with the WLGA and Councils to review the requirements for meetings which will be set out in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill capturing the learning from the Covid impacted period.

Meeting Styles and Preparation

During the current special circumstances, the style and tone of meetings are very different from conventional physical meetings. There are fewer meetings and some committees have not been convened. Those which have been held, focus on issues which are critical to the business of the council and require swift decisions. Meetings have also been held with fewer members participating, with a political balance agreed with political groups.

These changes require members to prepare thoroughly and focus on the outcomes required. There may not be time for extensive debate and members need to understand information and reports thoroughly prior to the meeting. Members find it useful to have prior discussions, remote pre-meetings or information briefings in addition to formal committee meetings. Members of quasi-judicial committees should, as always, guard against pre-determination.

Delegated decision making in some areas means that senior officers need to work closely with portfolio leads and committee chairs. Streamlined and rapid scrutiny processes (not necessarily through formal committees) may need to be developed to ensure that policy development and decisions are supported with effective research and challenge, prioritising issues posing the greatest risk to the authority.

Officers have increased or different responsibilities. Members cannot expect 'business as usual' rather, committee support is reduced, reports are more succinct, and less formal ways such as all member briefings have been found to provide members with information. The current period requires some adjustment to the democratic and political process and will require constructive group work, particularly where meetings need to be called at short notice and quorum requirements need to be met. Remote or virtual meetings require some patience and work much more effectively when members demonstrate respect for each other and the Chair.

Committee Chairs

Chairs are changing their styles and methods of working. Timescales are tighter and chairs need to work closely with other members and officers on work which does not require the whole committee. Chairs also have to work with officers to help members understand the different ways of working, manage their expectations and ensure that they are provided with all the information they need.

Chairs and officers should agree and advise members of the different 'rules of debate' before each meeting. This may include:

- Muting when not contributing
- Mutual respect for all participants
- Alphabetical approach to bringing members into proceedings under the strict direction of the chair (through participants' names alphabetically – to be fair on all participants, it may be appropriate to go from A-Z for one part of the meeting and then Z-A for another part)
- Avoidance of repetition where possible

- Respecting the chair and wait in turn to be called
- Methods for voting, for example calling each name alphabetically with a response of `for' or against

It is also important to clarify how questions from committee members can be raised during meetings, either via email beforehand or via email, the `hands up' function or online chat during a meeting, depending on the system being used.

Participating in Remote meetings

Like most people at the moment, members are having to get to grips with unfamiliar technology. Training and guidance, often one to one, has been provided by Democratic Services officers. The following suggestions have been found useful in preparing members for remote working. Most members are now able to access video conferencing. Currently Microsoft Teams is the most frequently used platform, although Zoom, Webex and GoToMeeting are also in use.

Suggestions for participants

1. **Equipment** – make sure you have appropriate equipment. PCs and Laptops tend to provide a more physically stable platform. You will need a camera. Headphones can help you hear more clearly; headsets will also cut out background noise or interference that you may not be aware of.

2. **Meeting preparation:**
   - Know how to join the meeting, practice in advance to check that you can join the meeting. Take part in any tests or dry runs.
   - Know how to adjust your settings such as microphone sensitivity and volume levels.
   - Know how to announce your presence if this is not done automatically.
   - Know how to mute/unmute your equipment – this is very important.
   - Know how to take part in any offline chats running alongside the meeting i.e. via text, email or online chats.
   - Know how to prepare files and documents and share your screen so that you can enable others to see documents or pictures.
   - Know what to do if your equipment fails, have a phone number to hand to call in case of technical difficulties.

3. Fully charge your equipment, long meetings can take a lot of battery.
4. Prepare thoroughly. The chair will assume that everyone has read any reports being considered and be looking for observations and focussed debate.
5. Call in from a noiseless location where possible. Even if you can mute your equipment, while you are speaking, everyone participating in the teleconference can hear every noise that you, your children, your pets and the birds in the garden are making.

6. Make sure that you can view papers. If you are using printed copies, try not to shuffle them too much when you are unmuted. Remember that you can view papers by using two devices or splitting your screen. Papers can usually also be shared through screen sharing.
7. Call from a comfortable position, as the meeting may take some time, have some water handy.

Participating in meetings

8. Call in on time. Call in a couple of minutes before the meeting starts so that the meeting can start on time. Participants will know who is joining late. and when callers join or leave the meeting, this can be disruptive.
9. Do not shout, adjust volume as necessary.
10. Turn off any noisy gadgets such as mobile phones which may be distracting to yourself or other participant. These can also cause interference.
11. Check that you can see the chair of the meeting.
12. Focus on the business at hand. Make sure that your contributions are necessary and helpful for securing the outcomes that the committee is seeking.
13. Remember that you should be the only person able to hear any confidential and exempt items being discussed.
14. Make sure that you are in the centre of the screen by positioning your device or camera appropriately and look into the camera. Aim for a head and shoulders shot like a passport photo.
15. If it is a formal or public meeting, it might look more appropriate to sit upright at a work surface rather than sitting on a sofa with a laptop on a coffee table, although 'workspace' at home can of course be limited.
16. Keep your device still and on a flat surface.
17. Consider your personal appearance, you will be on show throughout the meeting.
18. Consider the background – Some applications provide you with an option to blur the background, so no detail is shown or your Council may have a corporate background for you to use. If not, aim for a plain wall backdrop as your bookshelves or notice board may be distracting for other meeting participants. You may have confidential or inappropriate information on the wall behind you.
19. Consider lighting, Is there enough light for people to see you? Is the sun or artificial lighting 'bleaching' out your face?
20. Ask family members to stay out of shot as people wandering about making coffee for example can be distracting.
21. Check how the chair will be calling on you to speak.
22. Check how you will signify a wish to speak.
23. If you are using the 'hand up' feature to ask a question, make sure that you switch it off when you no longer wish to speak.
24. Remember that meetings, if not live, may be made available to the public on websites, so it is important to conduct yourself as you would in any public meeting. Some applications make whatever is available on your computer screen visible to those participating in the meeting, this may also be seen by the public.
25. Do not leave the meeting until it is finished without notifying the chair apologising and explaining your reasons for leaving early.

Suggestions for Chairs

Chairing remote meetings can be challenging. You might consider the following:

1. Make sure that you are personally prepared as for participants above, arrange pre meets with officers and members if necessary.
2. Join the meeting early to check that everyone is present and greet them personally as they join.
3. Consider scheduling some social time at the beginning or end of the meeting so that members can 'catch up' with each other
4. Check at the beginning that everyone is able to participate and has no problems accessing papers, knowing what other communication channels to use for off-line discussion with, for example, other group members.
5. Remind participants that they should mute their equipment when not speaking
6. Provide guidance on how members should signify that they want to speak, comment or vote.
7. Make sure that you can be seen by all participants if this is an available function, perhaps by setting yourself up as a meeting convenor.
8. For larger meetings, you may wish to work with an officer convenor to handle some of the meeting logistics.
9. Ensure that members use any 'chat' facilities for meeting business only.
10. Adhere to the usual requirements but consider ways of streamlining processes such as reading apologies yourself rather than having officers read them.
11. To avoid people speaking over each other or long silences, ask each member in turn for their contribution to an item. You may wish to do this alphabetically.
12. Check occasionally through the meeting that no one has been 'lost' due to technical issues.
13. 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.
14. Check at the end of each agenda item that all members are content that they have been able to contribute.
15. Be more rigorous than usual in insisting that members stay focussed on the issue under discussion and do not waste time with irrelevant contributions or agreement with previous contributions.
16. Schedule comfort and refreshment breaks.
17. Evaluate the meeting at the end for suggestions on how systems can be improved in the future.

Well-being

Although participating in meetings remotely can seem less onerous than physically travelling to a venue, virtual meetings can bring different challenges. Participating in a traditional meeting allows for social contact and changing your viewpoint. Focussing on a screen for long periods can cause eye strain and headaches. Intense concentration can be mentally tiring. Inactivity can result in muscle or back pain. Members may wish to consider the following to avoid these problems.

- Arranging informal catch ups with other members and officers between meetings to maintain relationships outside meetings
- Scheduling regular breaks between meetings
- Moving regularly even if it's only to run up and down stairs or empty the washing machine
- Setting an outdoor exercise period each day
- Staying hydrated
- Taking your eyes off the screen regularly, maybe doing eye exercises
- Setting up an 'official' workspace which has a comfortable chair and which you can get away from when you are not working.

Returning to Scrutiny

During the initial months of the COVID 19 emergency, most council meetings were postponed pending the widespread introduction of remote attendance and both cabinet and scrutiny committee forward work programmes have generally been suspended or re-prioritised to focus on urgent decisions. Councils have prioritised the return of decision-making arrangements such as cabinet and planning committees, however, scrutiny arrangements have been particularly affected given the redeployment of staff and resources. Scrutiny support officers may have been redeployed to frontline services, working long hours, and developing new skills to support, for example, vulnerable people at particular risk. Senior officers have had less time to devote to preparing reports that would traditionally have been considered by scrutiny committees.

Whilst traditional scrutiny committee meetings may not have been possible, some councils have facilitated member oversight and scrutiny through joint meetings between committees, established new Covid 19 committees or provided all member or scrutiny committee briefings. Scrutiny chairs and vice chairs have often been consulted or involved in the taking of urgent decisions. Several authorities have held remote scrutiny meetings, and most will have reintroduced regular scrutiny meetings by September and are currently reviewing their work programmes.

There is clearly a vital role for the scrutiny function at this time, not least in making sure that the decisions which have to be taken urgently are the right ones, are working for communities and have been taken in consultation with residents and other stakeholders. In those authorities where scrutiny has been reintroduced, committees have been overseeing, constructively challenging and making suggestions about how councils are responding to the Covid pandemic, recovery planning and sustaining innovation. For example:

- Support for communities, such as supplying food parcels, support for vulnerable and shielding people, community tensions, homelessness and community engagement, support for Asylum Seekers and Refugees and coordinating volunteers.
- Social care and public health, such as care services, Test Trace and Protect, preparations for a second wave.
- The local economy, such as support for small businesses, re-opening tourist destinations, measuring the economic impact of the virus, support for the construction industry and building resilience to future crises.

- Organisational priorities, such as staff welfare, homeworking, employment and redeployment, the capturing and implementing of innovation and lessons learned from the Covid period, new approaches to democratic engagement and flexible meetings.
- Education, such as returning to school, school transport arrangements and free school meals.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny suggests that as the crisis begins to ease, "Scrutiny will have a leading role in reshaping the organisation ...and can challenge councils to be innovative and creative." More information from the Centre for Public Scrutiny [here](#).

There are also unique opportunities now for innovation in the scrutiny function itself. Before Covid, councils were working to improve a scrutiny function in Wales which was described by Audit Wales as unclear about its role and lacking impact due to overly formal and structured approaches. There is an opportunity now to speed up these changes and rethink and reset how we do scrutiny.

Moving Forward

Meeting practice has developed significantly since the start of the new arrangements. As with many aspects of council business, there has been significant learning and innovation. The Welsh Government is working with the WLGA and councils to reflect useful changes in new legislation so that councils will have more flexibility in future. Flexible meeting arrangements seem to have enabled more members to attend and will enable a wider range of people to stand for office. There may also be opportunities to lessen the bureaucracy associated with meetings, making them more effective by focussing on outcomes and inclusivity rather than process and tradition.

And, as Huw Lloyd Jones from Audit Wales observes in his blog [here](#)

"Virtual meetings might also offer more longer-term benefits, for example by reducing councillors' travel time, costs, and associated environmental impact. The live webcasting of meetings also has the potential to increase public accessibility and engagement with council business."