

Committee: **Democratic Services Committee**
Date of meeting: **11th March 2024**
Report Subject: **Multi Location Meeting Policy and Council Chamber Options Moving Forward**
Portfolio Holder: **Cllr S Thomas, Leader of the Council / Cabinet Member Corporate Overview and Performance**
Report Submitted by: **Gemma Wasley, Service Manager Performance and Democratic**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
	22/02/24	27.02.24		11/02/24			21/03/24	

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 For Democratic Services Committee to review the Council's Multi Location Meeting Policy (found at appendix 1), which is used to inform Members, Officers and the public how multi-location meeting arrangements and the electronic broadcasting of meetings will operate at Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council.
- 1.2 The Policy has been developed in line with legislative requirements as outlined by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- 1.3 The Policy was first approved by Council in September 2022.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 Since April 2021, the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 has come into force and enables Councils to operate multi-location meetings whereby Members, Officers, the public and Press are able to attend meetings physically or remotely.
- 2.2 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'.
 - o Meetings must be capable of being held virtually, but each authority must decide whether their meetings will be held fully

virtually, partially virtually 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.

2.3 When considering arrangements for remote attendance or 'multi-location meetings', authorities must have regard to the statutory guidance as part of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

2.4 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.

2.5 The statutory guidance also stipulates that authorities should develop a policy setting out how the multi-location meetings will operate and reflect the meeting arrangements in the constitution.

2.6 **The Purpose of a Multi-Location Meeting**

The establishment of multi-location meetings has a number of benefits which the Council is looking to promote. Multi Location Meetings:

- Provide greater participation in meetings by the public and external participants;
- Make it easy for the public to view and participate in decision making and the democratic process observing discussions, recommendations and decisions are made in a transparent way;
- Ensure 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;
- Provide significant time and cost savings for councillors and officers particularly in relation to regional arrangements; and

- Make it easier for participants to take part in meetings when they have employment, family, caring or other commitments.

2.7 **Blaenau Gwent Council Multi-Location Meetings**

Multi-Location meeting facilities are available within two rooms at the General Offices, Ebbw Vale, within the Sir William Firth Room and Hot Mill Room.

2.7.1 The Multi-Location Meeting Policy is to be used to support all meetings of the Council, its Committees and member development sessions, whose participants are not all in the same physical place.

2.7.2 The Multi-Location Meeting Policy includes detail of:

- Legislative requirements;
- Detail of what a Multi Location Meeting is;
- The process in Blaenau Gwent;
- Broadcasting of Meetings;
- Recording of Meetings by Others;
- Exempt and Confidential items;
- Calendar of Meetings;
- Attendance;
- Meeting Procedures; and
- Chairing.

2.7.3 The Multi Location Meeting Policy is supported by a number of other documents that should be considered when either conducting or participating in a multi location meeting, including:

- The Council's Constitution;
- Hybrid Meeting Protocol; and
- Information Security Policy.

2.8 **Changes to the Multi Location Meeting Policy**

The first Blaenau Gwent Multi Location Meeting Policy was agreed by Council on 29th September 2022. Since this first iteration, a number of minor amendments have been made, following learning and to make it more efficient, the changes include:

Page Number on Policy, Section and Change Made	Reason for Change
Page 1 Contents Page Added	To ease use of the Policy and its contents
Page 2 Background – WG web link removed	Outdated link
Page 3 Blaenau Gwent Multi Location Policy – Changed name of room	Rooms have changed since the first iteration of the Policy. Reflects Council decision

<p>Includes Council decision of how meetings are currently held</p>	
<p>Page 3 Exempt or Confidential Items – Added a recommendation regarding exempt or confidential items</p>	<p>Suggestion to improve how we operate for exempt or confidential items</p>
<p>Page 4 Attendance at Meetings – Process amended</p> <p>Information now in bold, ‘If no response is received, then it will be assumed that invitees wish to attend via Microsoft Teams’.</p> <p>Process - Minimum number of physical attendees amended to minimum number of members in physical attendance</p> <p>Table - Scrutiny Committees added, ‘(meetings to be held at the Chair’s discretion)’</p> <p>Table - Member Development Sessions – Change from all meetings as hybrid to fully remote unless requested</p>	<p>Change to process to make it more efficient and easier to collect responses directly through email rather than contacting Democratic Services by phone.</p> <p>Bold to highlight the process.</p> <p>The Multi Location Meeting policy is in place for Members and not officers.</p> <p>Bracket added to reflect decisions of Chairs when conducting their meetings.</p> <p>Change made following majority of Member Development Sessions being held fully remote and also reduces administrative burden on staff</p>
<p>Page 5 Procedures at Meetings – included legislative requirements regarding member cameras</p>	<p>Under legislation Members should be seen and heard in meetings and members should have their cameras on during meeting</p>
<p>Page 6 Attendance at Meetings Whilst Out of the Country – Added a link to the Blaenau Gwent Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) Policy</p>	<p>Ease of access to this policy</p>
<p>Page 6 Chairing – Section amended from, ‘Chairs and vice-chairs are encouraged to attend meetings in person in order to benefit from the direct support of Democratic Services’ to, ‘As hybrid meeting arrangements have been operational for some time, Chairs</p>	<p>Amendment reflects current processes.</p>

and vice-chairs are encouraged to manage meetings how they feel most comfortable whether that be in person or remotely. Support and advice from advisors and Democratic Services are provided in either scenario, when required'.	
Page 7 Supporting Documents	Added link to updated Constitution

2.9 **Future Options for the Location of Committee Meetings**

- 2.9.1 Since the Covid pandemic in 2020, rooms at the General Offices have been used to facilitate a Mass Vaccination Centre which brought in income to the Council.
- 2.9.2 Recently the ABUHB have vacated the space at the General Offices. This offers an opportunity for the reconsideration of a venue to accommodate a Council Chamber.
- 2.9.3 The Jack Williams Conference Hall, located on the ground floor of the General Offices is a large space that could accommodate a Council Chamber, or there are potentials to consider other space for a Council Chamber if needed.
- 2.9.4 A number of factors would need to be considered and agreed before the establishment of a new Council Chamber.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Multi Location Meeting Policy** (appendix 1) –

Option 1a

Recommend approval of the Multi Location Meeting Policy at Council and for it to be used to support all future democratic meetings and member sessions.

Option 1b

Make amendments to the content of the Multi Location Meeting Policy, noting the legislative requirements, before recommending to Council for approval, and for it to be used to support all future democratic meetings and member sessions.

3.2 **Establishment of a Working Group to consider Options for a Council Chamber** –

Option 2a

For Democratic Services Committee to recommend to Council for approval the establishment of a Members working group to look at requirements, costs and potential alternative options for a Council Chamber and provide the findings back to Council for consideration and approval.

Member Work Group Template is found at appendix 2.

Option 2b

For Democratic Services to recommend to Council to maintain the current arrangements for Committee meetings.

4. Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

4.1 The Multi Location Meeting Policy is a requirement of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

4.2 The statutory guidance also stipulates that authorities should develop a policy setting out how the multi-location meetings will operate and reflect the meeting arrangements in the constitution.

5. Implications Against Each Option

Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)

5.1 Multi Location Meeting Policy –

5.1.1 The resources required to support multi location meetings have already been established. No further investment is required at this time.

5.2 Council Chamber –

5.2.1 There will be costs associated with creating a Council Chamber at the General Offices should members wish to pursue this option or at an alternative location including:

- Cost to relocate the hybrid meeting system, or the purchasing of a new system;
- Electric and socket installation;
- Wifi;
- Furniture;
- Room Design;
- Acoustic works and sound enhancement (replace windows or alternative to reduce noise)

5.2.2 *Please note - any works at the General Offices would need to be approved by CADW and no work can disturb the current building design. There may be costs associated with undertaken work with CADW.*

5.2.3 If it is agreed for works to be undertaken at the General Offices, or an alternative location, a budget code would need to be established as there is currently no budget to support this type of work.

5.3 Risk including Mitigating Actions

5.3.1 There is a risk to the Council if the Multi Location Meeting Policy is not adopted in line with Legislation.

5.3.2 The Council is required to offer democratic meetings to be held on a hybrid or remote basis. **Authorities may not mandate physical attendance at meetings.**

5.4 ***Legal***

5.4.1 The Multi Location Policy has been developed following Welsh Government guidance and the requirements as part of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

5.4.2 There is a requirement for all meetings of Council to be broadcast live. This will be a future development for the Council.

5.5 ***Human Resources***

5.5.1 Democratic Services staff are trained in use of the hybrid meeting system and in operating multi location meetings. However, the staff resource to operate the system is significant, therefore a minimum attendance at the General Offices is required.

5.5.2 Further training is being sought on the broadcasting of live meetings as there is a statutory requirement for all Council meetings to be broadcast live (the current arrangements for recording meetings and uploading the recordings onto the website are suitable for all other democratic meetings).

6. **Supporting Evidence**

Performance Information and Data

6.1 As part of the Council's performance management information the number of attendees at committees and those attending virtually or physically is recorded.

6.1.1 Data collated from June 2023 to January 2024. Prior to this the system was not being used and all meetings were held remotely using Microsoft Teams.

6.1.2 Committees not offered as hybrid during the period:

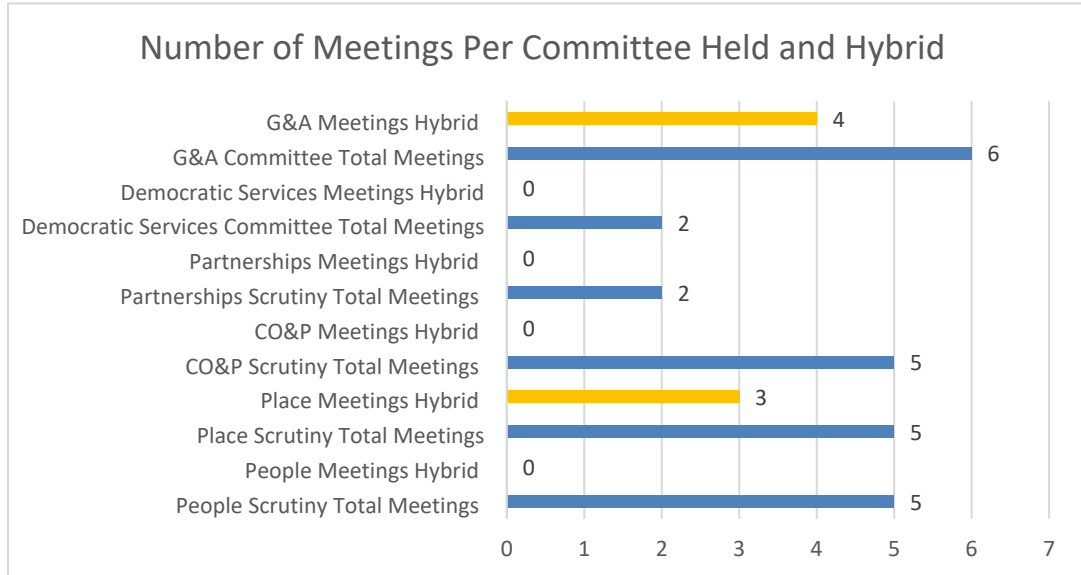
- Council;
- Planning Committee; and
- Licensing Committee.

6.1.3 Committees offered as hybrid during the period:

- Place Scrutiny Committee;
- Partnerships Scrutiny Committee;
- People Scrutiny Committee;
- Corporate Overview & Performance Scrutiny Committee;
- Democratic Services Committee; and
- Governance & Audit Committee.

6.1.4 Since June 2023, 28% of meetings offered as hybrid have been held hybrid. The chart below shows that only two committees have conducted their meetings using a hybrid format:

- Place Scrutiny Committee; and
- Governance and Audit Committee.



6.1.5 The table below shows member attendance at meetings held as hybrid:

Month	Hybrid Committee	Number of Members at the GO	Number of Members on Teams	Total Meeting Attendance
21 st June 2023	Governance & Audit Committee	3 out of 8*	5 out of 8*	100%
20 th June 2023	Place Scrutiny Committee	7 out of 9	2 out of 9	100%
12 th July 2023	Governance & Audit Committee	2** out of 8*	3 out of 8*	62.5%
August 2023	Summer Recess			
20 th September 2023	Governance & Audit Committee	3 out of 8*	5 out of 8*	100%
5 th September 2023	Place Scrutiny Committee	4 out of 9	3 out of 9	77.7%
18 th October 2023	Governance & Audit Committee	2** out of 8*	4 out of 8*	75%
November 2023	No hybrid meeting held; all meetings fully remote			
5 th December 2023	Place Scrutiny Committee	4 out of 9	5 out of 9	100%
January 2024	No hybrid meeting held; all meetings fully remote			

*Governance and Audit Committee had a vacancy therefore between June and November the total number on the Committee was 8 and from December onwards it was 9.

**As per the multi-location meeting policy, 3 members indicated attendance at the General Offices but then attended remotely

6.1.6 The table below shows the number of meetings offered as Hybrid but held fully on Teams and Member Attendance:

Meeting Date	Committee Meeting Held Fully Remote	Member Attendance
22 nd June 2023	Corporate Overview & Performance	8 Members - 88.8%
5 th July 2023	Special Corporate Overview & Performance	8 Members - 88.8%
13 th July 2023	Democratic Services Committee	9 Members plus 4 Chairs/Vice-Chairs - 100%
18 th July 2023	People Scrutiny Committee	9 Members - 100%
August 2023	Summer Recess	
14 th September 2023	Corporate Overview & Performance Scrutiny	8 Members - 88.8%
19 th September 2023	People Scrutiny	9 Members - 100%
12 th October 2023	Corporate Overview & Performance	9 Members - 100%
18 th October 2023	Governance & Audit	6 Members - 66.6%
19 th October 2023	Special Partnerships	8 Members - 88.8%
13 th November 2023	People Scrutiny	5 Members - 55.5%
16 th November 2023	Partnerships Scrutiny	9 Members - 100%
1 st December 2023	Governance & Audit	7 Members - 77.7%
6 th December 2023	Corporate Overview & Performance	8 Members - 88.8%
16 th January 2024	Place Scrutiny	9 Members - 100%
17 th January 2024	Governance & Audit	6 Members - 66.6%
18 th January 2024	Corporate Overview & Performance	7 Members - 77.7%
30 th January 2024 (10am)	People Scrutiny	7 Members - 77.7%
30 th January 2024 (12:15pm)	People Scrutiny	6 Members - 66.6%

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

Multi Location Meetings provide greater participation in meetings by the public and external participants.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

Multi Location Meetings:

- Make it easy for the public to view and participate in decision making and the democratic process observing discussions, recommendations and decisions are made in a transparent way; and

- Make it easier for participants to take part in meetings when they have employment, family, caring or other commitments.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The hybrid meeting system and Multi Location Meeting Policy supports long term thinking for the Council and provides future proofing for democratic meetings that support digital infrastructure.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

The Multi Location Meeting Policy and Information Security Policy have been developed to prevent issues arising from the inappropriate use of the Council's ICT.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

Arrangements can be made in future for partner organisations to utilise the hybrid meeting system at the General Offices.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

Training and support for managing the hybrid system will be provided across Council Services, such as Business Support, so that meetings, outside of the democratic arrangements, can operate on a hybrid basis.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

Multi Location Meetings:

- Ensure 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; and
- Provide significant time and cost savings for councillors and officers particularly in relation to regional arrangements.

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***

The Multi Location Meeting Policy provides alternative options for attendance at meetings, supporting those with caring or work needs as well as those who may not be able to attend meetings physically. Reasonable adjustments can be considered, on a case by case basis, to support the engagement and participation in meetings by members, officers and the public.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 The Democratic Services Committee will have responsibility for the reviewing of the Multi Location Meeting Policy before approval at Council.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- Appendix 1 Multi Location Meeting Policy
- Appendix 2 Task and Finish Group Template
- Constitution - [The Council Constitution | Blaenau Gwent CBC \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk)
- Hybrid Meeting Protocol



Hybrid Meetings
Protocol.docx

- [Blaenau Gwent CBC: Democracy \(blaenau-gwent.gov.uk\)](http://blaenau-gwent.gov.uk)

- Information Security Policy



Information-Security-Policy-v12-FINAL.d