Un Llais Cymru

One Voice Wales

COVID-19 Outbreak

Remote Attendance at Meetings

A Guide for Councillors and Clerks

April 2020

Introduction

This guidance is designed to support Councils to manage meetings on a remote basis in accordance with temporary emergency regulations[1] designed to relax some of the rules relating to the conduct of council business, so that important decisions can still be made during social distancing. This means that Councils can now hold official meetings virtually, with members dialling in to telephone conferences or participating via video conferencing.

Meeting Styles and Preparation

During the current special circumstances, the style and tone of meetings will be very different from conventional physical meetings. It is possible that there will be fewer meetings and some committees may not be convened depending on the requirements of each Council. Those which are held, will focus on issues which are critical to the business of the council and may require swift decisions.

These changes will require members to prepare thoroughly and focus on the outcomes required. There may not be time for extensive debate and members will need to understand information and reports thoroughly prior to the meeting.

Some Councils may choose to grant delegated decision making to the Clerk/officers which mean that he/she will need to work closely with Council and committee chairs.

Remote or virtual meetings require some patience and work much more effectively when members demonstrate respect for each other and the Chair.

Chairs

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

- Muting when not contributing
- Mutual respect of 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
- Ensuring that members declare interests and do not take part in the discussion or voting on any relevant matter

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

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[1] Under S78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020.

Participating in meetings

Like most people at the moment, members are having to get to grips with unfamiliar technology. Training and guidance will inevitably be limited so the advice is to jump in and give it a try and have some dry runs to build your confidence. You'll probably be teleconferencing or video conferencing and using other channels for less formal communication. The Clerk should be able to offer guidance to members about how to participate and the following may also help you be fully prepared.

Phone meetings (Conference Calls)

Suggestions for participants

1. Equipment – make sure you have appropriate equipment. Speaker phones with mute functions are more effective for teleconference meetings (you may be online for over an hour – speakerphone/hands free means you can take notes, type or multi-task). If you do not have one, the council may be able to provide one (or reimburse you for a purchase-they can be purchased cheaply online). If your phone signal is poor, you may be able to use your computer to make calls over the Internet. Headphones can help you hear more clearly; headsets will also cut out background noise.

2. Meeting preparation
   - Know how to join the meeting (remember that numbers for landlines and mobiles may be different). Practice in advance to check numbers
   - Know how to adjust your settings such as microphone sensitivity and volume levels
   - Know how to announce your presence
   - 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 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. Landline signals tend to be clearer than mobiles – and cheaper!
5. Prepare thoroughly. The chair will assume that everyone has read any reports being considered and be looking for observations and focussed debate.
6. 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.

7. 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.
8. Call from a comfortable position, as the meeting may take some time, have some water handy.
9. 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. Some teleconference systems include audible notifications when callers join or leave the 'meeting', this can interrupt and disrupt meetings.
10. When joining the meeting and before speaking, introduce yourself with your full name so participants and minute takers are in no doubt who is speaking.
11. Don't shout, adjust volume as necessary.
12. Turn off any noisy gadgets such as mobile phones which may be distracting to yourself or other participants.
13. Focus on the business at hand. Make sure that your contributions are necessary and helpful for securing the outcomes that the Council or committee is seeking.
14. Don't put the call on hold to make another call as there may be unwanted sound.
15. Remember that you should be the only person able to hear any confidential and exempt items being discussed.

Suggestions for Chairs

Chairing telecon 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 the Clerk and members if necessary.
2. Join the meeting early to check that everyone is present and greet them personally as they join.
3. Check at the beginning that everyone can participate and has no problems accessing papers.
4. Hold a roll call at the start of the meeting for the benefit of the Clerk/officers taking minutes.
5. Remind participants that they should mute their equipment when not speaking and remind them to say their full names before speaking.
6. Provide guidance on how members should signify that they want to speak or vote.
7. Adhere to the usual requirements but consider ways of streamlining processes such as reading apologies yourself rather than having the Clerk/officers read them.
8. 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.
9. Check occasionally through the meeting that no one has been 'lost' due to technical issues.
10. 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.
11. Check at the end of each agenda item that all members are content that they have been able to contribute.

12. 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.

Video conferencing

Many members will have used 'videoconferencing' software previously on their mobile phones, tablets or laptops, most will have used apps such as FaceTime, Skype or WhatsApp. Whilst some of these may be suitable for smaller meetings, you are likely to use apps such as Microsoft Teams or Skype for Business for larger meetings. Your council will advise you on which system is to be used.

There are additional issues to be borne in mind when participating in a video conference

1. Check that your equipment has a camera.
2. Have a test run a few days in advance of the meeting to iron out any technical issues – using this equipment and software will become more familiar and straightforward the more you use it.
3. Check that you can see the chair of the meeting.
4. 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 similar to a passport photo.
5. Keep your device still and on a flat surface.
6. Consider your personal appearance, you'll be on show throughout the meeting.
7. Consider the background, 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. Is there enough light for people to see you? Is the sun or artificial lighting 'bleaching' out your face? Some applications provide you with an option to blur the background, so no detail is shown.
8. Ask family members to stay out of shot as people wandering about making coffee can be distracting.
9. Check how the chair will be calling on you to speak.
10. Check how you will signify a wish to speak.
11. 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 if access to the public has been provided for.

Suggestions for Chairs

1. Make it clear how people will participate and how you will invite people to contribute.
2. 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.
3. For larger meetings, you may wish to work with the Clerk/officers to handle some of the meeting logistics.
4. Ensure that members use any 'chat' facilities for meeting business only.

5. Evaluate the meeting at the end for suggestions on how systems can be improved in the future.

Overall, with a little trial and error remote attendance should be fairly easy with patience and respect.