

**Aelod Cabinet dros Gofal Cwsmer;  
Democratiaeth a Chyfreithiol; Y Gymraeg •  
Cabinet Member for Customer Care;  
Democracy and Legal; Welsh  
YCynghorydd / Councillor  
Ioan Thomas**

The Scrutiny, Democracy and Participation Team  
Welsh Government  
Cathays Park  
Cardiff  
CF10 3NQ

20 August 2013

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE:

**CONSULTATION: REMOTE ATTENDANCE OF MEETINGS**

Statutory Guidelines issued under Section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Bill 2011.

**Gwynedd Council's Response**

A discussion was held on the consultation document Remote Attendance of Meetings at a meeting of Gwynedd Council's Democratic Services Committee on 4 June, 2013. Subsequently, all of the Council's elected members were invited to submit their observations on the consultation document. This response submits a summary of all the observations received.

Generally, due to the substantial size of the county of Gwynedd, and the time it takes to travel from one end of the county to the other, we agree with the intention of the amendments in section 4 of the Local Government (Wales) Bill 2011 to include the possibility of the remote attendance of meetings. However, there is some concern regarding the risk of losing the atmosphere of meetings and the intensity of discussions by not being present in the principal location of any meeting.


Despite the general support for this proposal, there are some concerns regarding the practicality of implementing the requirements, specifically:


The right to see and hear

In order to ensure equality for elected members who are part of a meeting, along with members of the public who attend meetings, any member who wishes to remotely attend a meeting should be able to:

- Be seen and heard by the members who attend the meeting in its principal location
- See and hear those members who are in the principal location of the meeting
- Hear and be heard by other members who are remotely attending
- Be seen and heard by any member of the public who has a right to attend the meeting

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It is acknowledged that realising this poses a technical challenge, and that a good quality technical system is required, and this of course will have financial implications. On the grounds of the above, in using video conferencing to enable the remote attendance of meeting, it is believed that the following circumstances are not suitable:

- When there are a substantial number of members and officers present as the equipment does not allow for every one to be seen, such as full Council meetings, planning committee meetings and scrutiny committee meetings.
- when the public are present

Training and support for the remote attendance of meetings

In the consultation document, the need for training for those officers who could remotely attend a meeting is acknowledged in order to assist them with the requirements of the legislation in addition to dealing with any practical matters. However, it is believed that it is crucially important to secure the appropriate training for the Chairs of any meetings of committees that permit remote attendance also, in order to ensure that those meetings can be held effectively, and that those members who remotely attend receive a fair hearing and are able to contribute fully. In addition to training, it is believed that there is a need to change the culture and mindset of officers and elected members in order to implement the request for the remote attendance of meetings.

It should be noted that officer support would only be available to members wishing to use the remote attendance facility in the Local Authority's locations, and not in any location the elected members may choose to exercise their right to remote attendance i.e. not in the personal property of any member.


Information Technology and Communication Policy


It is acknowledged that some circumstances will arise where the technology is unreliable that could lead to loss of connection with the meeting in the principal locations. Under such circumstances, a clear protocol will need to be followed, that will enable the meeting to continue despite the absence of any member who wishes to use the remote attendance facility. Clear and firm procedural rules will be required along with the understanding of the chairs and all members (regardless of the means of attendance) of the implications of implementing this.

Translation

In the consultation document it is acknowledged that there is a need to recognise equality between the Welsh and the English languages when considering remote attendance of meetings on the one hand, and on the other hand it is noted that Welsh speakers who view the broadcast from another location will be required to listen to an English translation of the discussions being held in Welsh. This does not display linguistic equality neither does it correspond to the commitments made in the Local Authorities' Language Plans.

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The Welsh Government needs to consider and acknowledge the complexity of providing a translation service when remote attendance is available. When meetings with remote attendance are held within Council offices it is possible to provide translation in all locations, thus ensuring linguistic equality. Nevertheless, consideration must be given to the resources investment (equipment and staff) needed to provide translation for one meeting that is held in a number of locations simultaneously, especially when resources are diminishing.

It is suggested that the Welsh Government should strengthen the need for Local Authorities to meet the commitments of their Language Plans in the most appropriate way by enabling the remote attendance of meetings, and that this facility should not be made available under circumstances where the Authority would not comply with the commitments of its Language Plan. It is acknowledged in reference to this that Gwynedd Council's situation might possibly be unique as Welsh is the Council's official language of administration.

These observations are submitted in a constructive manner by supporting the basic principle and the intention of enabling the remote attendance of meetings for members. The obstacles to overcome are:


- The right to see and hear
- Training
- ITC
- Translation


It is also acknowledged that Local Authorities have a long way to go to achieve the aim in terms of the resources that are available, the technology, and the change of culture and mindset required in order to enable the effective remote attendance of meetings, which promotes democracy, participation and equality for all.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Ioan Thomas  
Customer Care Cabinet Member  
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