

GWYNEDD COUNCIL



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council

Date of meeting: 7 October 2021

Title of Item: Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 – update for hybrid meetings.

Purpose: To submit an update to the full Council following the adoption of arrangements to hold Council meetings in order to address the new requirements in Part 3 of the Act at its meeting on 08/07/2021

Cabinet Member: Councillor Nia Jeffreys

Contact Officer(s): Geraint Owen, Head of Democracy Services

1. THE DECISION SOUGHT

It is recommended that the Full Council accepts the report for information.

2. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Foreword

1. At the Full Council meeting on 8 July 2021, the Council resolved to adopt interim arrangements to continue to hold virtual meetings only during the period from May 2021 onwards, until noted otherwise. Members will also remember that a protocol and relevant amendments to the constitution were adopted.
2. The report in July noted that work was underway to develop arrangements to hold hybrid meetings, whilst also ensuring the safety of Councillors and officers when it is timely to return to the chambers.
3. It was noted that an update on the work would be presented to the Full Council on 7 October 2021.

Support from the Cabinet

4. In addition, further support was received from the Cabinet in order to move forward with the hybrid meetings agenda. At the Cabinet meeting on 27 July 2021, it was agreed to use the £130,000 from the 'Recovery Arrangements Fund as a result of Covid19' to fund schemes to enable hybrid meetings and remote attendance at Council meetings in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

Update

5. As was reported in July, amendments to the act mean that arrangements must be adopted (and published) which will allow people to attend a meeting from different places. In other words, remote attendance to meetings must be allowed. Such meetings could be held virtually only (our current arrangements) or a combination of meetings held at a venue but with some members attending remotely. It was noted that the term "hybrid" is used to describe meetings that are held in this way.
6. Specific project work has been established to progress the work. The first obvious step is to develop the necessary technology to offer hybrid meetings. This work has commenced at Siambra Dafydd Orwig and Siambra Hywel Dda during September.
7. Following the practical work of upgrading the technology and the chambers, relevant officers will receive training in order to operate the technical aspects of holding hybrid meetings, whilst also continuing to run a full programme of committee meetings as usual. In addition the systems will be tested in order to ensure that the technology meets the basic requirements of
 - being easy for staff and councillors to use (and anyone else likely to be using it)
 - meeting bilingual and webcasting requirements
8. Note that we foresee some challenges to overcome, such as the voting arrangements. We will work on solutions to the challenges.
9. The next step will be to run a pilot of the arrangements with specific committees to allow Councillors to trial the arrangements and receive some training. As reported in July, the Head of Democracy Services, in consultation with the Chairs of individual committees, can agree to hold a pilot scheme of any proposed arrangements. The intention is to proceed with this element during the Autumn term.

Next steps

10. Alongside the steps noted above, we will be required to establish a protocol on how to hold hybrid meetings (similar to the protocol for holding virtual meetings adopted by the Council on 08/07/2021). As part of the work it will be required to establish the Council's policy with regards to which committees and which types of committee meetings can be virtual and which will be held as a hybrid meeting. This will build upon the initial work carried out by the Democracy Services Committee on 18/02/2021 which supported continuing to hold some Council meetings virtually only with others being held as hybrid

meetings. In addition, continued consideration must be given to the regulations and guidance in place with regards to the coronavirus – see 12 below.

11. The Democracy Services Committee will discuss the draft protocols at its meeting in November 2021. The Cabinet will discuss and adopt its own arrangements as required. Subject to the technical and practical developments, the intention is to present the draft protocols to the Full Council meeting in December. It is anticipated that we will require a trial period for arrangements, which will be reviewed within a sensible timeframe.
12. Note that all the developments are subject to Coronavirus regulations which are relevant to our decisions regarding attending offices. When the All Wales Alert Level was reduced to ‘0’ at the beginning of August, there was no change to Welsh Government guidance and it was clear that everyone should continue to work from home if possible. At the moment, for us here at Gwynedd Council, there is no change to the working arrangements already in place. A risk assessment for attending the workplace safely is being created for officers who are required to attend the office to trial the new technology, however this could result in potential slippages to the work programme. Continued consideration must be given to the national guidance as the situation is reviewed.

3. ANY CONSULTATIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

- 3.1 The Democracy Services Committee was consulted on the interim arrangements at its meeting on 29/06/2021. In addition, as the Cabinet's arrangements are separate, the interim proposals were reported to the Cabinet on 06/07/2021. The interim arrangements were adopted by the full Council on 08/07/2021.

3.1 STATUTORY OFFICERS' OBSERVATIONS:

Monitoring Officer:

I have had the opportunity to advise on this matter as part of the project in relation to the new Act. No observations to add in relation to propriety.

Statutory Finance Officer:

I confirm that the Cabinet agreed to fund £130k to the scheme from the 'Recovery Arrangements Fund as a result of Covid19' during the meeting held on 27th July.

The IT service has worked with the Democracy and Language Service to ensure sustainable developments for hybrid meetings for the future. The report notes the progress to date in accordance to the work programme and is a true reflection of the current developments.