

APPENDIX 23 HYBRID (MULTI-LOCATION) MEETING POLICY

Policy adopted for Hybrid (Multi-Location) Meetings which is relevant to the conduct of all hybrid meetings of the Council and its various committees and sub-committees.

Torfaen County Borough Council Hybrid (Multi-Location) Meeting Policy

This policy shall be adopted for hybrid meetings and is relevant to the conduct of all hybrid meetings of the Council and its various committees and sub-committees.

Introduction

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 requires the Council to hold meetings without all, or any, of the members being physically present in a room. It allows for remote meetings through electronic and digital means using Teams, live webcasting and live interactive streaming.

In line with the regulations passed under the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and Torfaen County Borough Council's Hybrid Meeting Protocol, this Policy is designed to provide a guide to virtual formal committee meetings involving members, officers and the public.

Provision of Meetings and Multi-location Meeting Platform

In order for members to be able to attend meetings of the council remotely, they need not be physically present, provided they are able to hear and be heard, and where practicable, see and be seen by other councillors and members of the public attending remotely or in person.

All formal meetings will offer the digital hybrid facility. The 'place' at which the meeting will be held will be the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, where the digital hybrid facilities have been installed.

All members of the committee, including the Chair, have a personal choice to attend hybrid meetings physically (in person in the Council Chamber) or remotely (via Microsoft Teams).

The following meetings will be run through Teams, live webcasting and live interactive streaming:

Council
Cabinet
Scrutiny Committees,
Planning Committee
Statutory and General Licensing

All other formal meetings will also offer the hybrid facility, they will not be live streamed, however they will be recorded for subsequent transmission via the Council's YouTube page and will be available to view online as soon as possible after the meeting has concluded.

Other meetings such as pre-agenda meetings, panel meetings, appeals etc, will be conducted by whatever suitable means possible. Democratic Services will agree the provision of these meetings with members and any other officers involved.

Where meetings are lived streamed, Members of the press and public are able to view the meeting via the link on the Public-I website or physically by attending the public gallery in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre. For all other meetings that are open to members of the press and public, a link to view the meeting via Microsoft Teams may be provided by Democratic Services or the public gallery is available on a first come first served basis.

Publication of agendas and minutes and consideration of exempt items

Meeting agendas and papers will continue to be published on-line (via Modern.Gov) at least 3 clear working days prior to the meeting taking place. Where the meeting is being broadcast live, a link to the live stream will be included. Upon request, paper copies will be made available to members of the public in attendance at meetings at the Council Chamber.

Where applicable, a decision sheet will be published for each meeting within 7 working days of the meeting taking place. The decision sheet will include the names of who attended the meeting, declarations of interest and decisions made.

Minutes will be uploaded once the meeting has taken place.

Prior to consideration of exempt items, the Chair will formally close the meeting to members of the press and public. A member of Democratic Services will check that members of the press and public attending remotely have 'left' the meeting. Any members of the press and public sitting in the public gallery will also be asked to leave. A member of Democratic Services will confirm that the live streaming facility has been stopped. Exempt items are published privately on Modern.Gov and are only accessible with a username and password of appropriate Members and Officers. Exemptions are clearly outlined as a heading on all exempt reports. Where paper copies are required, all reports are printed on pink paper.

During exempt items, remote participants must ensure that their venue is secure and that no member of the public can see or hear the meeting, and no recording, other than the Council's, is taking place.

Where there is any reference to background papers, a link to access the papers is provided.

Meeting Attendance

A member of Democratic Services will monitor 'participants' attending remotely and a record of attendance will be taken during the meeting. An attendance report is available via Microsoft Teams for remote attendees. Democratic Services will keep a record of participants attending physically. A full record of attendance will be recorded through the minutes of meetings, including the times at which members enter and leave committee meetings. If a member turns their camera off, this will be considered as leaving the meeting.

If there are any technical difficulties experienced during the meeting, the Chair may call a short adjournment until the issues have been dealt with. In the event of failure, the meeting should be suspended unless the Chair agrees that the meeting remains quorate and the business remaining is sufficiently urgent to warrant the continuation of the meeting.

Interests will be declared at the start of each meeting. If members have an interest to declare during the meeting, they must do so by raising their hand or using the raised hand icon and waiting for the Chair to call on them.

Any members participating remotely who declare a prejudicial interest will leave the meeting until the Chair or a member of Democratic Services calls them back into the meeting.

Any member who is not present for a substantial part of a meeting without providing prior exceptional reasoning may be issued a warning at the discretion of the Chair. Any member who is repeatedly not present for a substantial part of meetings and who has not provided reasoning for doing so may be referred to Democratic Services for inclusion in the annual attendance report to Ethics and Standards, at the discretion of the Chair.

Specifically in the case of scrutiny meetings; should a member not be present and participatory for a substantial portion of that meeting, then that member will be marked as absent at the discretion of the Chair

Participation and Access to the Meeting

The Members Code of Conduct still applies to hybrid meetings, and the same procedures undertaken in a physical meeting still apply.

Members of the press and public who are viewing the meeting are able to join the meeting on teams or sit in the public gallery prior to formal commencement of the meeting. Council members should be mindful that any conversations can be heard and viewed in the Chamber or via Teams, it is therefore important that council members conduct themselves in a professional manner from the point of joining the meeting.

Participants must try to limit disturbances wherever possible. Mobile phones and other electronic devices must be on silent during the meeting.

Participants must remain in view of the camera at all times and a professional appearance must be upheld at all times.

Unless exceptional circumstances have been agreed with the Chair prior to the meeting, cameras should remain switched on throughout. If a member needs to turn their camera off for a comfort break or another urgent reason, they must inform the Chair via the chat function, stating the reason. The member should switch their camera back on as soon as they return and confirm their return in the chat. Any member in contravention of these requirements will be issued a warning by the Chair

A member of Democratic Services will be on-hand to provide technical support. Any technical difficulties must be reported to the Democratic Services Officer as soon as possible.

The Chair will remind councillors that Members in the Chamber are on camera and may be visible on screen. The Chair will also remind members and officers to speak clearly into their microphones and to mute their microphones when not speaking.

When invited to speak, the remote attendee will unmute their microphone and make their contribution. Once finished they will mute their microphone. Members attending in the Council Chamber will use their microphone when invited to speak and must remember to turn their microphone off immediately when they have finished speaking. It is important that members do not speak over each other so that everyone present can hear proceedings.

Prior to agreeing any recommendations, if Members participating remotely wish to speak, they must clearly use the raised hand icon to notify the Chair.

Use of the chat function is discouraged to simplify the process for the Chair. Members should also remember that any press and public in attendance will be able to view anything written in the 'chat bar'.

Public attendance at meetings

For Full Council meetings, the Council will continue to take questions from the public as set out in the Constitution. A copy of the question will be circulated electronically and published on the Council's website. The member of the public asking the question will have the option to participate via Teams, or to attend physically to ask their question in person.

Where a member of the public has made a submission to speak at a Planning Committee, Democratic Services Officer will invite them to join the meeting remotely or in person at the Council Chamber and make their deputation at the relevant committee item.

Invitees at Overview & Scrutiny Committee's are able to attend physically in the Council Chamber or remotely via Microsoft Teams.

Where meetings are live streamed, Members of the press and public are able to view the meeting via the link on the Public-I website or physically by attending the public gallery in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre. For all other meetings that are open to members of the press and public, a link to view the meeting via Microsoft Teams may be provided by Democratic Services or the public gallery is available on a first come first served basis. Democratic Services will be on hand prior to the start of the meeting to provide technical assistance and support to remote and physical participants. Officers will continue to be available to provide support and to ensure that everyone has the skills and knowledge to confidently participate in remote meetings.

Where the Chair is not physically attending the meeting, the Democratic Services Officer will be asked to identify members in the Council Chamber wishing to speak. Members in the Council Chamber must raise their hand if they wish to speak. Members attending remotely must use the raised hand icon if they wish to speak.

For meetings of Full Council, Democratic Services will prepare a detailed briefing note for the Presiding Member to be able to manage the business of the meeting electronically.

Voting

As a general rule, the Chair will ask voting members if they are in favour of the recommendations, if they are against the recommendations, or if they would like to abstain from voting. Where appropriate, the voting procedure will be a roll-call vote, with the Chair or a member of Democratic Services asking each voting member individually for their vote. Whilst the recording of the meeting will retain each member's vote, this will not be recorded in the minutes unless a formal recorded vote is required.

There will be a voting feature included in the modern.gov app which is being rolled out to members and this will be accessible via the members tablets. As members receive training and gain experience in using the modern.gov app voting will be conducted via the app.

Conclusion

All participants in hybrid meetings will follow the policy set out above.

Hybrid meetings of Torfaen County Borough Council and its various committees will ensure a flexible platform for democratic processes which will allow remote and/or in-person participants to share ideas, engage and contribute to debate and decision making. Hybrid meetings will also provide the opportunity for increased resident engagement, and greater transparency of Council processes.