

**MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL  
REPORT**

<p><b>SUBJECT: Hybrid Council Meeting Protocol</b> <b>MEETING: Democratic Services Committee</b> <b>DATE: 7<sup>th</sup> September 2020</b> <b>DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: N/A</b></p>
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**1. PURPOSE:**

To review and approve a protocol for the holding of hybrid council meetings.

**2. KEY ISSUES:**

The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 have enabled local authorities to continue to undertake its democratic functions during the Covid-19 period and relaxed the rules on how authorities can conduct their meetings.

Since the introduction of the regulations, the Council has adopted fully remote council meetings held through Microsoft Teams with all participants participating in the meeting virtually. Whilst this system has allowed the authority to continue make democratic decisions during this period and has been welcomed by councillors, many members have expressed concerns about its long term use and that fully virtual meetings can lead to a lack of detailed debate on items.

Additionally, forthcoming legislation contained in the Local Government and Elections Wales Bill will require local authorities to ensure that remote attendance at council meetings is available for all councillors who wish to use it and will likely take effect following the next local elections in May 2022.

During the August recess, a solution has been found that will enable the Council to hold hybrid meetings where remotees can participate in Council meetings alongside councillors in the Council Chamber, whilst ensuring that all participants can be live streamed. This solution will ensure we can support the long term aspirations of enabling remote attendance at meetings for those that wish to continue to do so whilst supporting members who wish to be face to face in a meeting.

Clearly, once the coronavirus legislation expires the rules around remote attendance will fall back in line with the Councils Constitution and/or new legislation regarding remote attendance and will need to be considered in that context when that time comes. In the short term, the application of hybrid council meetings and particularly physical attendance at meetings will need to be considered alongside the Councils own protocols for access to buildings, social distancing rules and any other restrictions imposed on gatherings.

To that end, the attached Hybrid Council Meeting Protocol sets out how the Council can operate its meetings using both physical and remote participants. Much of the technology and processes adopted for fully virtual meetings has

been carried over to the hybrid meeting, particularly in terms of how the chat functionality is used to gather votes and indicate a desire to speak.

As a contingency, should there be any technical issues with the hybrid meeting model then the meeting would be adjourned for a short period and if possible the meeting will continue in a fully virtual environment or if necessary postponed until a future date.

Whilst the adoption of the protocol will allow for the Council to slowly re-introduce physical meeting practices it will need to be done so in a safe and structured way and will need some flexibility in terms of its implementation depending on the needs of the committee. For example, where a planning committee requires a high number of attendees from applicants, agents, objectors and officers, it may be necessary to reduce the number of members physically present in the chamber compared to other meetings to ensure the safety of members, guests and officers.

### **3. OPTIONS APPRAISAL:**

#### **Do Nothing:**

Leaving things as they currently stand will require the Council to continue to hold its meetings fully remotely until such a time is deemed safe for all members and officers to be present in the Council Chamber. The Council will still be required to prepare for the implementation of remote attendance at future council meetings due to the Local Government and Elections Bill.

#### **Adopt a Hybrid Meeting Protocol:**

By agreeing and adopting a protocol for hybrid council meetings, preparations can be made to slowly introduce councillors back into the physical meeting environment whilst allowing those members who wish to participate remotely to continue to do so. Adoption of a hybrid meeting will also prepare councillors for the implementation of the future requirements regarding remote attendance.

### **4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

There are currently no budget implications as a result of this protocol. However, the adoption of the protocol relies heavily on the technology that is currently available for the Council to use. Should these change at any point in the future then additional costs may be incurred to continue with this solution and a separate report would be brought forward to the relevant committee at that time.

### **5. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS:**

The hybrid council meetings protocol and adoption of remote attendance at council meetings will seek to encourage participation from individuals who may not be able to physically attend the meeting, be that a councillor, guest or member of the public and the flexibilities it offers could open up the future election process to candidates who would otherwise not normally be able to commit to the duties of being a councillor.

**6. SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS:**

None

**7. CONSULTEES:**

None

**8. AUTHOR:**

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