

REPORT

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| SUBJECT: | TIMING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS |
| MEETING: | DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE |
| DATE: | 27th June 2022 |
| DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: | N/A |

1. PURPOSE:

To put forward recommendations to Council on suitable timings of future Council meetings.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Democratic Services Committee agree a set of options on the timing of future Council meetings.

That those options are put forward to the next Full Council meeting for debate and to agree the most suitable option for future meetings.

That the Democratic Services Committee recommend to Council that it remains the discretion of each committee as to the time of the meetings that best suits the members of that committee.

3. REASONS:

Each local authority is required to review the times at which council meetings are held at least once in every term of the Council.

Guidance from the Welsh Government state that as a rule of thumb meetings will be held at times, intervals and locations that are convenient to the majority of members and that the Council should be willing to make changes to their pattern of working in order to retain new councillors with outside responsibility. Councils should also consider rotating meeting times due to the impossibility of pleasing all of their members all of the time.

4. KEY ISSUES:

The requirement to review the timing of council meetings was introduced as part of the Local Government Wales Measure in 2011 and a review of these arrangements was carried out under the previous Council. All councillors last term were surveyed as to their preferences at that time and details of the responses to that survey can be found at appendix A.

Much of the issues that members raised in that survey are still relevant today and have been included in this report to help give members of the committee and understanding of the issues members face. The responses also show that no matter the outcome, the decision will never appease all members.

Under the previous survey members were given the options of a start time of 10:00, 14:00, 16:00 and 19:00 with any other recommendations/comments welcome.

Whilst no time preference stood out from the responses, the main themes in the responses were meeting times clashing with full time employment, the difficulty in obtaining childcare outside normal working hours and the need for members to attend other meetings of external bodies including community/town councils in the evening as well as meet with residents who would otherwise be in work. Additionally, during the last term, group meetings were held prior to Council which if held at 10:00 may require members to convene twice on separate days rather than hold these meetings prior to Council.

There are three main considerations that should be given to the timing of the meetings; the ability for members to attend the meeting whether in person or remotely, the ability for members of the public to participate in the meeting and engage in local democracy and the desirability of meeting times to potential new councillors.

It should also be noted that under previous reviews, the ability for councillors and members of the public to participate in meetings remotely was not an option and this method of interacting with council meetings may have a bearing on the time meetings are held going forward.

At the request of Council in 2016, it was trialled that three Council meetings in the summer months (May AGM, June and July) would be held at 5pm. Following those meetings it would revert back to 2pm for the winter period. There was little impact at those meetings in terms of attendance with levels similar at the meetings prior to and following the summer months. Additionally, during those meetings only 1 question was put to Council from a member of the public.

It should also be noted that meetings of the Council are not held in August nor arranged during school holidays unless there is exceptional circumstances in which they need to be held.

The committee should also consider whether to offer a recommendation for the start time of just full council and leave individual committees with flexibility to determine its own start time based on the membership of each committee.

5. PROPOSALS

Given the reasoning above, it is proposed that this committee considers the timings and evidence below and put forward a

recommendation to Council as to the preferred timing of Full Council meetings. The committee does not need to use the below times exactly but the periods offer a reflection on the issues members face during the day.

10:00am

Positives

Early start for members meaning meetings will not go on in to evenings and potentially clash with personal life and other commitments.

Potential for members who have children in school to attend meetings without impacting on childcare.

Members potentially more alert at meetings during the day than longer meetings which may drag on into the evening.

Easier to allow for breaks during long meetings as time is available to finish the agenda.

Negatives

Members in full time employment required to take full day annual leave to attend meetings.

Difficult for members of the public in full time employment to attend meetings and contribute to the proceedings.

Group meetings may need to be arranged at another time as there will not be time to hold these prior to the meeting meaning members need to make themselves available twice.

14:00

Positives

Familiarity for members and the public that Council meetings always have started at 14:00

Meetings that start at 14:00 can allow for members to travel directly to another meeting of an external body.

Group meetings can be accommodated on the same day as Council.

Negatives

Longer meetings of Council can go on in to the evening.

Still requires members working full time to take annual leave to attend meetings.

16:00

Positives

Meetings can go on late in to the evening with members potentially reluctant to have a break to finish the meeting as soon as possible.

Members of the public could attend, particularly where public forum items could be moved to later on the agenda.

- Negatives
- Members still required to take leave if group meetings are held prior to the Council meeting.
 - Childcare can be difficult to arrange for members outside normal working hours.
 - Traffic issues at that time of day getting to County Hall particularly around schools.

19:00

- Positives
- Meetings at this time would not impact on those members in full time work.
 - Potentially more engagement with members of the public with meetings held outside normal working hours.

- Negatives
- Members who sit on outside bodies and community/town councils may have clashes in their diaries that other times would less likely impact upon.

Longer meetings of the Council could go on late into the night impacting on members and officers abilities to fully concentrate on the proceedings.

Meetings held in the winter months mean members travelling in the dark and sometimes dangerous weather conditions.

Difficulty for members with childcare needs to arrange this into the evening where they are unable to rely on family.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

No resource implications

7. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS:

There are no sustainability implications of the timing of meetings. However working members may be adversely affected by a council meeting start time between the normal office working hours of 9 am to 5 pm.

8. SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

Where members have governor responsibilities meetings which start at 5pm or later may interfere with their ability to attend meetings of their governing body.

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Local Government Wales Measure 2011 and supplementary Welsh Government statutory guidance.

10. CONSULTEES:

All members surveyed during the last term of the Council.

11. AUTHOR:

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Appendix A – Survey responses.

Extracts from comments received:

- “I am a full-time mother and have a full time job. The current timings of the Council meetings are, from a personal perspective, incredibly difficult to manage...I do not believe we will ever have inclusive democracy if we do not change the times of meetings to encourage greater participation – both in terms of those wishing to become Councillors and the public who wish to attend meetings. The majority of people of non-retired age have to work, the timings of the current meetings means that there is always a financial penalty involved.... I strongly believe that we need to change the times of our meetings to ensure that we have diversity across our Councillors and thus ensuring we have a participative Council which represents all interests.”
- “The timing of local government meetings must take into account parental responsibilities if the Monmouthshire County Council is serious about overcoming the demographic deficit.” Change is absolutely necessary if we want younger parents to take an active part in local government.”
- “When newly elected, a Councillor may have a fulltime job. Most Induction sessions have been during the day which means that Councillors have to take days off or rely on lenient employers. Committee meetings etc throughout the day may be off- putting to potential candidates, especially younger people who may also have young families.” My concern is that the majority of candidates will be older and retired thus preventing diversity within the Council”
- “I have voluntary, outside body meetings in the evenings. Also all town council projects, full and planning are held in the evenings. I believe that if members are taking their allowance that they should treat it as a real job and attend meetings during the daytime.”
- “I believe that County Council meetings should be held during the daytime, because members have to attend other meetings i.e. Governors, Town & Community Council, outside interest meetings also ward business, which needs to be dealt with when their constituents are themselves at home from work, in the evenings. I know this might deter those who are in full time employment from becoming Councillors, but if their work time is so full during the daytime, they would not be able to give enough time to being a County Councillor successfully, anyway. Also I feel it is unfair on Council officers to have to work evenings when they may need to spend time with their families.”
- “Many meetings called by local organisations in the area one represents are evening meetings, these give you an opportunity to listen and take part in local issues. Most residents are in employment and to meet them the preferred time is in the evening.”

- “I need to fit my council work hours around my 9-5 employment. Although I have reduced my working hours to accommodate my council role and give flexibility, regular day time meetings has meant I have needed to take annual leave to attend meetings and training. I do not mean to have all meetings at 4.00 but if they could at least be varied as I am aware other councillors prefer other times due to differing commitments. 4.00pm allows me to attend work and get back in time to any meetings without needing to take regular annual leave.”
- “I think the committees themselves should evaluate their membership and if required should try to facilitate the needs of individuals if possible.”
- “I work full-time, which makes it extremely difficult for me to attend council meetings in the day. As a newly elected councillor, I am also excluded from every training session, because they are also all held in the day. I feel the current timings discourage people in full-time employment from becoming a councillor.”
- “I would prefer meetings to be either early or late in the day, since that minimises the disruption to the working day.... However I think the question is wrongly directed. Surely, if we want our residents to engage with the Council, we should be asking about the best time for them, not us.”
- “Evening meetings take place with the Community Councils in the area that I represent.”
- Where a meeting starts at 4.00pm there are difficulties with arranging childcare due to the uncertainty about the time the meeting will end.
- “Main choice 1000hrs. Meetings starting at 4pm means you have to leave your employment at least an hour prior to meeting in view of many schools finishing at 3pm. Traffic around town villages increased if you want to arrive earlier again more school traffic in the area and time wasted. Some training briefings need to be completed these could be done later in the afternoon; after 4.30pm this cuts out school traffic.”
- “I have opted for 10am, as if as I do you have primary caring responsibility for a child then being able to drop them to school, attend a meeting and be home in time to pick them up is very important. Whilst I understand the need to try and operate so that members of the public can attend area committees for example, 7pm is bedtime and if you have to travel to get to a meeting then whilst on an occasional basis this is fine it would be tricky all the time.... In addition to childcare responsibilities I also work 21hrs a week and fitting it all in is a juggling act.”

Timing of Full Council Meetings - Wales

| Authority | Time of County Council Meeting |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Blaenau Gwent | 10:00:00 |
| Carmarthenshire CC | 10:00:00 |
| Denbighshire | 10:00:00 |
| Pembrokeshire | 10:00:00 |
| Torfaen CBC | 10:00:00 |
| Conwy CBC | 10:00:00 |
| Ceredigion CC | 10:00:00 |
| Powys CC | 10:30:00 |
| Gwynedd CC | 13:00:00 |
| Anglesey | 14:00:00 |
| Flintshire | 14:00:00 |
| Neath Port Talbot | 14:30:00 |
| Cardiff City Council | 14:30:00 |
| Bridgend CC | 15:00:00 |
| Wrexham CBC | 16:00:00 |
| Caerphilly CBC | 17:00:00 |
| Newport Council | 17:00:00 |
| Rhondda Cynon Taf | 17:00:00 |
| Swansea City Council | 17:00:00 |
| Merthyr Tydfil | 17:30:00 |
| Vale of Glamorgan | 18:00:00 |