

## **PONTYPOOL COMMUNITY COUNCIL**

### **STATEMENT OF INTENT AND ARRANGEMENTS REGARDING MULTI-LOCATION MEETINGS**

This statement has been prepared in line with section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

“The 2021 Act requires that all community councils must make and publish arrangements for its meetings to enable people who are not in the same place to meet. Under the arrangements, councils will need to take reasonable steps to allow meetings to be held from multiple locations.”<sup>1</sup>

#### **Statement of principle**

Pontypool Community Council (PCC) believes in maximising transparency, promoting democracy and engaging with its communities, in the best way possible, as well as finding efficient and effective ways of working and providing the best possible opportunities for all people (members, staff, partners, the press, the public and other stakeholders) to attend Council and Committee meetings.

#### **Council and Committee meetings at Pontypool – the logistics**

PCC holds formal scheduled publicly accessible meetings as follows:

- a Council meeting once a month (except in August)
- a Policy and Finance Committee meeting once a month (excluding August)
- a Planning and Environment Committee meeting once a month (excluding August) and
- an Events Committee meeting once every two months.

PCC also holds meetings (once every two months) of the Establishment Committee. These meetings are about staffing issues and are normally confidential (so the press and public cannot attend).

The dates and times of meetings are agreed at the Annual Council meeting (in May every year, for the year ahead) and are published on the Council’s website.

The agenda for a meeting is published in line with the relevant provisions of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended by the 2021 Act and others), i.e. at least three clear working days before the meeting (unless in exceptional and urgent circumstances, which has never happened to date at PCC).

#### **Statement of current position and future intent**

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the Statutory Guidance to Town and Community Councils on the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, issued by Welsh Government

PCC holds and will hold all its formal meetings on a multi-location basis. This means that any person can attend the meeting, from wherever they are (not necessarily in the same physical place) and they can hear and be heard by everyone else attending the meeting.

In practice, this means people can attend the meeting, whether they are sat in the Council Chamber, whether they are at home or at work, whether they are in another location, or even when they are travelling between locations (e.g. in a car or on a train).

The result of the above is that the meeting is accessible:

- (1) by people meeting physically in the Council Chamber at the Pontypool Community Council offices at 35a Commercial Street, Pontypool, NP4 6JQ (or in another published location, if applicable) and
- (2) by people attending the meeting remotely (from any other place) by clicking on the Microsoft Teams link, which is attached to an email, inviting people to the meeting.

### **Methodology: technology**

PCC uses Microsoft Teams and a Meeting Owl Pro (Owl Labs) to facilitate multi-location meetings. This technology enables anyone attending the meeting physically and anyone attending the meeting remotely to hear everyone else attending the meeting and to be heard:

- by other people attending the meeting physically and
- by other people attending the meeting remotely.

### **How will the Council decide (on what basis the meeting will be held)?**

Every formal Council or committee meeting will be held on a multi-location basis.

There may be very rare cases, where there are exceptional circumstances, for example, where confidential matters are being discussed, and the meeting is not open to the press and public, when the Chair of the Council or Committee, alongside the Clerk, agrees that the meeting should be held only on the basis of physical attendance by members. Since 2020, no such exceptional circumstances have arisen and PCC does not envisage this occurring often.

If a meeting is discussing confidential matters only, and is not therefore open to the press and public, and needs to be held on a physical attendance only basis for exceptional reasons (e.g. to discuss sensitive staffing matters) then members of the Council or committee concerned will be given at least three clear working days' notice that they will need to attend the meeting in person.

There may be occasions when the Council Chamber is not open for members or the public to attend the meeting physically, e.g. when staff have been

informed before the meeting that no one wishes to attend the meeting physically, so no staff are in attendance at the Council offices, or if the Council offices are not available for some other reason, or if no staff are available to attend the meeting physically at the Council offices. In any case, whilst the Council Chamber may not always be available as a meeting venue, anyone attending the meeting can nevertheless attend the meeting from any other location they wish.

## **Attendance**

A person will be deemed to be in attendance at the meeting whether they are (a) physically present or (b) present online.

The Chair of the Council or Committee will announce who is present (in the Chamber and online) at the start of the meeting. He or she will be assisted in monitoring attendance during the meeting by a member of staff.

If the Chair cannot see that a person is attending (e.g. if it is not clear on screen or if someone arrives after the meeting has started), the person attending can announce that they are present. If the meeting is recorded, this recording will enable a final check to be made, of who was present (for the purposes of the minutes).

## **Voting**

Members will be able to vote in the normal way whether they are (a) physically present or (b) present online. Voting is normally by show of hands (either hands raised physically or hands raised electronically) as determined and announced by the Chair.

If a secret ballot is required, members may email a member of staff, to inform them of their vote, if they wish. The member of staff (when counting votes cast in secret) will not reveal the vote of the person who cast their vote and notified it by email.

The Chair of the Council or Committee will determine and announce the voting method if needed during a meeting. He or she will be assisted in counting votes cast (whether physically or remotely) by a member of staff.

The Chair will announce the result of all votes during the meeting (giving anyone attending the opportunity to interject if they consider their vote has been inadvertently missed).

## **Ways of working during the meeting**

Members, staff and anyone else attending a meeting online should mute their microphones when not speaking, to prevent background noise disturbing the meeting and other people in the meeting having difficulty hearing the debate.

Ordinarily, the chat function should not be used during meetings, as members and any other remote attendees have the option to speak out loud and express their opinions (as they would if they were attending physically).

Nevertheless, where members or other attendees do not have the option to speak out loud (for example their microphone is not working), they may use the chat facility to inform the meeting of this, and of their views.

The Chair of the Council or Committee will determine and announce if the chat facility may be used during a meeting. He or she will be assisted in monitoring the chat facility during the meeting by a member of staff. If the Chair does not make an announcement, then the chat facility will not be used.

### **Unruly conduct during the meeting**

In the normal way (in line with the Council's Standing Orders and the Member Code of Conduct) members are responsible for their conduct during meetings. The Chair is responsible for ensuring good conduct during the meeting. This requirement for good conduct applies equally to people attending a meeting physically and people attending a meeting remotely.

If a person attending remotely is disrupting the meeting, the Chair should ask them to stop doing so. If the person concerned continues to do so, they may be removed from the meeting by the Chair (assisted if necessary by a member of staff) in the same way as they would be asked to leave the meeting if they were physically present. Teams has the facility for the meeting organiser to remove people from the meeting if required.

### **Supporting other participants to attend the meeting**

If a person (e.g. a person reporting to the meeting from another organisation or a member of the press or public) wishes to attend the meeting, they should make a request to the Clerk, in line with the arrangements published on the agenda. The Clerk will have invited them to the meeting already (e.g. known outside speakers) or send them a link to attend the meeting (other people, on request). This may be done before the meeting (so that the person can attend the whole meeting if they wish) or during the meeting (so that the person concerned can join the meeting after the meeting has started if they prefer).

When a person who is seeking to attend a meeting (if they are not using a PCC email account) asks to join online, the Chair (or the member of staff clerking the meeting) will click "admit" to enable the person to enter the meeting at the appropriate time. If the appropriate time has not yet arrived (e.g. if the person concerned is attending only for a particular item at a particular time) then the person may stay in the virtual waiting room until they are admitted.

## **Ensuring the meeting is inclusive and accessible**

The Chair of the meeting is responsible for ensuring the meeting is inclusive and accessible. This means he or she should allow people to speak (within the normal process of deciding who should speak when) and watching out for people who have their hands raised (physically or electronically) and who wish to make a comment. The Chair will be assisted wherever possible in this aim by members of staff attending the meeting (as they may see hands raised, when the Chair does not).

## **Ensuring the meeting is consistent with the Welsh Language standards**

When meetings are convened and the agenda is issued, the agenda includes a Welsh translation of the meeting place, time and accessibility arrangements. This has been the case for many years.

A member of the public (or anyone else) may request a Welsh translation of the agenda (or any other document attached to the agenda). Arranging a Welsh translation may take several days (or longer) depending on the length of the document, as this service is not available in house.

Members of the public attending the meeting can also request (with at least three days' notice in writing) the facility to speak in Welsh. Again, this option has been in place for a number of years. A simultaneous translation of the relevant part of the meeting (into English) will require the attendance of an appropriately experienced Welsh speaker.

Welsh speakers are equally welcome to attend the meeting, whether in the Council Chamber or online.

## **Training and development**

Remote meetings are a relatively new initiative and have been in place at PCC since 2020. In the main, staff have traditionally to date operated the required equipment (a laptop with Teams and the Owl). Increasingly, Chairs of the Council and Committees may like to understand and have the option to operate the equipment themselves (so that, for example, the Chair can see if people have their hands raised and see who is in attendance).

Training and development for Chairs and other members can therefore be arranged on request.

## **Appendix B**

## **Excerpt from the Welsh Government Statutory Guidance for Town and Community Councils on the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021:**

### **2. Chapter 2 – Multi-location meetings**

2.1. The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 made temporary changes to meeting arrangements for community councils, allowing meetings to be held virtually (i.e. multi-location meetings) and requiring meeting documents to be published electronically. These changes allowed meetings to continue during the coronavirus pandemic. The changes proved popular and beneficial, so the Welsh Government made them permanent through the 2021 Act.

2.2. Many councils have found that attendance – including from the general public – and productivity of meetings have improved with multi-location meetings. There are also benefits in reducing travel and enabling councillors, members of the public and the press to engage more readily and more conveniently in council meetings.

2.3. Physical meetings should not be seen as representing the gold standard with multi-location meetings being second best. Physical meetings may be convenient and effective for some who are most used to them – but they may be inaccessible or inconvenient to many.

What are the requirements?

2.4. This section sets out the things that authorities must do in respect of multilocation meetings.

2.5. The 2021 Act requires that all community councils must make and publish arrangements for its meetings to enable people who are not in the same place to meet. Under the arrangements, councils will need to take reasonable steps to allow meetings to be held from multiple locations. If the arrangements are revised or replaced the new arrangements must also be published.

2.6. The practicalities of arrangements were considered carefully and it is important for councils to be clear the minimum requirement is that members are able to hear and be heard by others.

2.7. Examples of this could include:

- All participants are in the same physical location;
- All participants are in the same physical location except one individual who joins from another location e.g. by video or telephone conference;
- Roughly equal number of councillors are present in a physical space and joining through remote means;
- Wholly through remote means where no physical arrangements have been made.

2.8. Whilst physical meetings in the same location are allowable under the 2021 Act, councils must note that the 2021 Act requires that participants (i.e. council members, members of the public and press) are able to join meetings remotely – even if physical meetings are the preferred mode. Councils must publish these arrangements, for example, through standing orders. Councils are not allowed to resolve that all meetings will be held entirely physically. Councils should take reasonable steps to allow people to join from another location.

What should the arrangements consider?

2.9. The arrangements must be relevant to your council. They should be consistent with the Nolan principles of public life, the Code of Conduct for members of community councils and must take account of prevailing public health advice and/or legislation.

2.10. It is suggested that arrangements should cover:

- How a council will determine which meetings will have a physical element (i.e. a council meeting room) and how remote access will work in those cases;
- The venue for physical meetings and (if relevant) the appropriate online meeting platform and/or telephone access. This may require councils to consider the most appropriate venue for future meetings and value for money for any upgrades to infrastructure.
- Meeting attendance, including determining where a member is present and voting procedures;
- Ways of working during the meeting e.g. whether and how to use the chat function where appropriate, managing unruly conduct and voting;
- Arrangements to support other participants (including the public and the press) to be able to access and participate in the meeting. This might include virtual waiting room arrangements to ensure appropriate and timely access; and
- Ensuring the meeting is inclusive and accessible and consistent with any Welsh Language Scheme adopted by the council.

2.11. There is no requirement for meetings to be held in the same way every time it meets.

2.12. The chairing and running of the meetings will be slightly different depending on whether it is fully physical, fully virtual or a hybrid meeting. Arrangements need to adapt as councils learn from experience (i.e. from other councils and their own community) of what works effectively in securing clear, transparent, accessible meetings.

2.13. When deciding which meetings may be held wholly remotely and/or with physical provisions, councils should consider:

- The circumstances of individual councillors and their preference in the way they participate in meetings. Some councillors may wish to join council meetings from another location by default – because they have working or caring responsibilities which make attending meetings in person difficult. Similarly, some councillors may wish to attend in person;
- How members of the public are able to access meetings. There may be very good reasons why individuals are not able to attend in person, but would nonetheless wish to listen to proceedings about decisions which impact their lives. They may also wish to be heard in expressing views on business items;
- The accessibility of the press to hear about, and report on, local stories to enable wider public debate and accountability;
- The range of venues available within reasonable travelling distance. For instance, local schools or other public sector buildings may have infrastructure which makes remote access easier;
- How telephony and other technology can be used to support and facilitate multi-location meetings which is proportionate to the circumstances; and
- Whether arrangements can be adapted to accommodate late requests (e.g. just prior to, or during, the meeting) to join virtually where a meeting had been expected to be physical only, ensuring that the minimum standards are met - where reasonable.

Welsh language

2.14. Although community councils are not subject to the Welsh language standards deriving from the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011, they are expected to uphold the main principle of the Measure and treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English. The community council will want to consider how it could encourage and enable the use of the Welsh language at community council meetings, with the help of simultaneous translation for anyone who does not understand Welsh.

2.15. The Welsh Language Commissioner has provided advice on how to support bilingual working including:

- Bilingual drafting,
- Text translation;
- Using Welsh face-to-face; and
- Holding bilingual video meetings.