



DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE – 14TH MARCH 2023

SUBJECT: TIMING OF COUNCIL MEETINGS SURVEY

**REPORT BY: HEAD OF DEMOCRATIC SERVICES AND DEPUTY MONITORING
OFFICER**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To discuss the Timing of Council Meetings Survey prior to it being circulated to all members for completion.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to comment and endorse the questions outlined in the survey prior to circulation to all members.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That the committee discuss and endorse the draft Survey attached at Appendix 3 which will then be circulated to all members.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To satisfy the Council's statutory duties under the Local Government Wales Measure 2011.

5. THE REPORT

- 5.1 Section 6 of the Local Government Wales Measure 2011 and associated guidance sets out a requirement for local authorities to review the times and intervals at which meetings of a local authority are held at least once during the term of the administration. An extract of the current guidance is set out in Appendix 1, however updated **draft** statutory guidance was consulted on last year which is attached at Appendix 2. The final version is currently awaiting Ministerial approval.

- 5.2 Members will note that the principles remain largely the same with the guidance recognising that the timing of council meetings is a significant factor for individuals who decide to stand for election and the importance of providing flexibility to support the changing needs of councillors when they are elected so that diversity can be maintained.
- 5.3 The general principle is that meetings should be held of a length and at times, intervals and locations which are convenient to its members, having regard to equality and diversity issues. Also, regardless of whether meetings are fully on-line, multi-location or in person, agendas should provide for suitable breaks as this not only promotes a more effective meeting but is essential for members' and officers' health and wellbeing.
- 5.4 When considering the results of the survey, councils should also consider whether there may be advantages to rotating meeting times due to an impossibility of meeting all of their members needs all of the time. Any such arrangements will, of course, need to be clearly publicised for the benefit of interested members of the public.
- 5.5 The issues to be included in a survey could include :
- (i) Whether daytime or evening meetings are preferred;
 - (ii) Whether meetings are to be multi-location;*
 - (iii) The preferred meeting length
 - (iv) Whether particular times cause difficulties for Councillors with particular characteristics, such as age, gender, religion, having caring responsibilities or being in employment.

*Members will recall that Council adopted its Multi-location Meetings Policy in May 2022 with all meetings being held on a multi-locational basis.

- 5.6 By way of background, a survey was undertaken prior to the end of the last administration however the response rate was low and so the survey was placed on hold until after the Local Government Elections last May. This intervening period has given both returning and new members time to experience the meeting cycle times particularly as all meetings have been held on a multi-locational basis since the Annual Meeting in May. As such now would be the optimum time to undertake the survey to gauge members views.
- 5.7 Members will be aware that currently the majority of council meetings are held in the evening, for example full Council has a usual start time of 5pm along with Planning Committee and all Scrutiny Committees start at 5.30pm. Cabinet is generally held in the afternoon together with the Governance and Audit Committee, with Licencing Sub Committees (Taxi and General and Licencing and Gambling) held in the morning with all other committees held at various times throughout the day.
- 5.8 A copy of the draft survey is attached at Appendix 3 for members comments which takes account of the additional issues outlined above. Subject to the committees approval the Survey will be circulated to all members with a submission date of 3 weeks from its launch date.
- 5.9 **Conclusion**

The committee are asked to consider and endorse the content of the Survey attached at Appendix 3 which will be circulated to all members. The results of the survey will be brought back to this committee for discussion.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

6.1 No assumptions are necessary within this report.

7. SUMMARY OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment will be undertaken when the results of the survey have been received and analysed.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

9. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no personnel implications arising from this report.

10. CONSULTATIONS

10.1 The views of the consultees have been incorporated into this report.

11. STATUTORY POWER

11.1 Local Government Wales Measure 2011

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 Statutory Guidance made under Section 6 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure
Appendix 2 Draft Guidance as at March 2022
Appendix 3 Section of Questionnaire – Meeting Times

APPENDIX 1

Statutory Guidance made under Section 6 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011

Timing of Council Meetings

Introduction

1.1 Part 1 of the Measure contains provisions related to the strengthening of local democracy. More specifically, Chapter 1 of this Part deals with “promoting and supporting membership of local authorities” and section 6 relates to the timing of meetings.

1.2 These provisions flowed from proposals developed in the report of the Councillor Commission Expert Panel *Wales Are We Being Served?* published in 2009. It included a number of recommendations aimed at making local government service more attractive to a more diverse cross-section of the adult population. These included laying greater emphasis on the roles of “backbench” councillors, including through the introduction of remote access to council meetings, a review of councillors’ time commitments, a bi-annual survey to establish councillors’ support needs and engaging with employers to try and attract more candidates from the employed workforce.

1.3 In this context, the times at which meetings of the local authority take place is of considerable significance as it can affect the extent to which individuals may contemplate standing for election.

What the Measure requires

1.4 This is statutory guidance issued in accordance with section 6 (1) of the Measure. By virtue of section 6 (2) of the Measure, local authorities must have regard to this guidance in respect of the times and intervals at which meetings of a local authority are held. The relevant meetings in the context of this guidance are meetings of the full council and any committee or sub-committee of the council. Reviewing existing arrangements

1.5 Only members of council executives are considered to be “full-time” councillors and this is reflected in the levels of payments that they are currently entitled to for their special responsibilities. By contrast, non-executive members are considered to undertake the equivalent of a part-time role, which will, in many cases, need to be fitted around whatever other commitments councillors may have.

1.6 The Expert Panel found that, although many councillors are retired, others had difficulty in marrying their work commitments with those of their council duties, or, in other cases, did so at the expense of any meaningful personal time.

1.7 For many prospective councillors in full-time employment, the extent to which their employers are supportive of their new commitment is a vital concern. Although employment legislation entitles councillors to time off for public duties, operating that in practice may be more difficult.

1.8 The timing and frequency of meetings is the most problematic issue in this respect. Other duties may be fulfilled at times which suit the individual but a meeting is at a set time and (subject to any arrangements made for remote attendance) at a set venue.

1.9 It is neither practical nor desirable for the Welsh Government to prescribe the times and frequency of meetings of the full council, committees and sub-committees as these are matters for each local authority to consider in individual circumstances. However, it is

important that local authorities do not simply continue to hold their meetings at the same time as they always have done simply out of inertia. What may have been tradition or an arrangement which suited the previous generation of councillors will not necessarily serve the interests of the new intake.

1.10 All local authorities should review the times at which meetings are held at least once in every term, preferably shortly after the new council is elected. The rule of thumb should be that meetings will be held at times, intervals and locations which are convenient to its members and as far as is practicable have regard to equality and diversity issues. Councils should find ways of surveying their members, at least after each election, to assess their preferences and should be committed to act on the conclusions. The survey should be carried out within three months of ordinary elections. It will be for each authority to decide on the regularity of such surveys.

1.11 Although this process could result in long-serving councillors having to make changes to their pattern of working that would be worth doing if it meant that the council was better able to retain new councillors with outside responsibilities.

1.12 Issues to be taken into account in conducting a survey could include: • Whether daytime or evening meetings are preferred. • Whether particular times cause difficulties for councillors with particular characteristics, such as age, gender, religion, having caring responsibilities or being in employment.

1.13 As a result of the survey, local authorities should also consider whether there may be advantages to rotating meeting times due to an impossibility of pleasing all their members all of the time. Any such arrangements will, of course, need to be clearly publicised for the benefit of interested members of the public.

APPENDIX 2

Draft Guidance as of March 2022

Annex 1 1. Timing of Council Meetings Statutory Guidance

Status of this Guidance

1.1 This is statutory Guidance made under Section 6 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 (the Measure). By virtue of section 6 (2) of the Measure, local authorities must have regard to this guidance in respect of the times and intervals at which meetings of a local authority are held. The relevant meetings in the context of this guidance are meetings of the full council and any committee or sub-committee of the council.

Purpose

1.2 Part 1 of the Measure contains provisions related to the strengthening of local democracy. More specifically, Chapter 1 of this Part deals with “promoting and supporting membership of local authorities” and section 6 relates to the timing of meetings.

1.3 The times at which the meetings of a council take place is of considerable significance as it can affect the extent to which individuals may contemplate standing for election. This is an area for concern as it may impact on the diversity of membership of the council and thus impact on the council’s ability to make decisions which are informed by and reflect the diversity of people living in the council area. Decision making informed by insight from people of all ages and backgrounds is likely to be more balanced and have more focus on sustainable and long term solutions which balance the needs of different people in keeping with the principles set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

1.4 For example, whilst the requirement to provide the facility for multi-location meetings for members who wish to join meetings remotely (see section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (the 2021 Act)) should overcome some concerns, many people will find attending, sometimes lengthy meetings, in the day is incompatible with their paid employment and certain times of day are challenging for people with caring responsibilities such as young children. Therefore, for the purposes of this guidance the timing of meetings includes their frequency and length.

Review of Existing Arrangements

1.5 Only members of council executives are considered to be “full-time” councillors and this is reflected in the levels of payments they are entitled to for their special responsibilities. By contrast, non-executive members are considered to undertake the equivalent of a part-time

role, which will, in many cases, need to be fitted around whatever other commitments councillors may have.

1.6 For many prospective councillors in full-time employment, the extent to which their employers are supportive of their new commitment is a vital concern. Although employment legislation entitles councillors to time off for public duties, operating that in practice may be more difficult (see Section 50 of the Employment Rights Act 1996 (1996 c18))

1.7 The timing, length and frequency of meetings is the most problematic issue in this respect. Other duties may be fulfilled at times which suit the individual but a meeting is at a set time and (subject to any arrangements made for remote attendance) at a set venue.

1.8 It is neither practical nor desirable for the Welsh Government to prescribe the times, length and frequency of meetings of the full council, its committees and sub-committees as these are matters for each council to consider in individual circumstances. However, it is important that councils do not simply continue to hold their meetings at the same time, in the way as they always have done, simply out of inertia. What may have been tradition or an arrangement which suited the previous cohort of councillors will not necessarily serve the interests of the current one. It is recommended that meetings should be held of a length and at times, intervals and locations which are convenient to its members, having regard to equality and diversity issues. Also, regardless of whether meetings are fully on-line, multi-location or in person, agendas should provide for suitable breaks as this not only promotes a more effective meeting but is essential for members' and officers' health and wellbeing.

1.9 Therefore, all local authorities should review the times, frequency and length of meetings at least once in every term, preferably shortly after the new council is elected. However, with the advent of five year terms it would be prudent to consider an increase in this frequency to accommodate changes in circumstances that may accrue during that period.

1.10 Councils should survey their members, at least once shortly after each election, to assess their preferences and should be committed to act on the conclusions. The survey should be carried out at such time as it will be of most benefit to incoming members but no later than six months following ordinary elections. It will then be for each authority to decide on the regularity of such surveys.

1.11 Issues to be taken into account in conducting a survey could include:

- Whether daytime or evening meetings are preferred.*
- Whether meetings are to be multi-location.*
- The preferred meeting length.*
- Whether particular times cause difficulties for councillors with particular characteristics, such as age, gender, religion, having caring responsibilities or being in employment.*

1.12 When considering the results of the survey, councils should also consider whether there may be advantages to rotating meeting times due to an impossibility of meeting all of their members needs all of the time. Any such arrangements will, of course, need to be clearly publicised for the benefit of interested members of the public.