

Remote Meeting Survey undertaken by One Voice Wales to assess the views of Community and Town Councils on the effectiveness of remote meetings. The results are based on an analysis of a bilingual questionnaire sent by email to all member Councils on 9th July with a closing date of 24th July. One Voice Wales is very appreciative of the time member Councils have taken in responding to the questionnaire survey. The information gleaned will be evidence to assist the Welsh Government in assessing whether for the future there would be merit in including provision in legislation for a continuation of some elements of the remote meeting provisions contained in the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020.

The results of this survey provide clear and strong evidence that member Councils value having the facility to hold remote meetings, made possible by the introduction of temporary regulations by Welsh Government in April 2020 in response to the pandemic and lockdown which made it impossible to hold physical meetings. Detailed results are available in the Appendix. A total of 346 member Community and Town Councils responded to the survey which is 55% of the current membership of One Voice Wales. This is an excellent response rate for a survey of its kind, since email surveys usually secure between 25-33% response rates. It is a good reflection on the level of engagement of member Community and Town Councils with One Voice Wales. It also gives an assurance that the results are reliable indicators of the views and opinions of member Councils about remote meetings and their effectiveness.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (85%) had met at least once remotely between April and June, with only 15% not having done so. This is particularly significant given that the crisis had not allowed for preparatory training nor previous access to video technology and specialised equipment. Interpretative guidance and a good practice guide was however produced by One Voice Wales. Over 70% considered them to be an effective means of holding meetings.

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Respondents referred to a number of matters which they considered to be the disbenefits of remote meetings:

- Councillors lacking IT knowledge and either without the necessary hardware or internet for video meetings or not wanting to use the facilities they have to do so;
- Technical issues due to lack of effective broadband in rural areas being problematical and intermittent connectivity during meetings;
- Chairing meetings more difficult, the voting process and possible stifling of discussions particularly with highly disputed agenda items;
- Provision of translation facilities;
- Signing of cheques more difficult;

Many of the above issues could be addressed by training and the availability of hardware and better internet connection.

The benefits of having the facility to hold remote meetings seem to far outweigh the disbenefits, including:

- more focussed, efficient and well-attended meetings;
- maximising and diversifying engagement by members of councils, the public and press, including the future recruitment of new members;
- savings on time, travel costs, room hire, printing of papers;
- more environmentally friendly;
- mitigating the effect of extenuating circumstances;
- ability to arrange urgent meetings of Council with minimal time and cost implications, thereby improving democratic decision making;
- scheduling meetings of sub-committees, project meetings and working groups;

Based on the survey's results and the fact that two thirds of respondents (66 %) said they would like to retain the facility for remote working, it is recommended that:

- permission to hold remote meetings in future should be enshrined in law.
- the legislation should include flexibility to permit a hybrid situation where members and the public could attend meetings either physically or remotely. Meetings could be live streamed to provide full public access.
- for the future remote meetings/working could be supported and facilitated by ensuring the availability of training for staff and councillors.
- consideration be given to support Community and Town Councils to fund the technical equipment needed by Councillors e.g. by extending to Community and Town Councils the facility available to unitary authorities for claiming equipment costs refunds from Welsh Government.
- it would be useful to assess whether or not unitary authorities could provide Community and Town Councils with a link to their technical facilities for remote meetings in order to facilitate public participation and an easier login process and if so, whether it would be beneficial to do so.