

**North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority**  
**Meetings Policy**

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (“the Authority”) has produced this policy on how it will hold its meetings in order to explain its approach to the holding of meetings of its members, and how the public may view and/or participate in them.
- 1.2 The policy applies to meetings of the Authority, its committees and any panels containing elected councillors or co-opted members organised in accordance with the Local Government Acts 1972 and 2000. It does not apply to internal working meetings of the employees of the Authority nor to business meetings that they might hold from time to time with councillors.

## 2.0 Policy and Legislative Context

- 2.1 The Authority holds meetings of its councillors pursuant to the Local Government Act 1972 and, in the case of the Standards Committee, the Local Government Act 2000 plus subordinate legislation under each statute.
- 2.2 This policy is produced in accordance with the Authority’s duty under section 47 Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- 2.3 Under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 the Authority has considered how this policy contributes to the 7 well-being goals and the 5 ways of working.

Long term	The Authority covers a large geographical area, and it recognises the CO2 emissions associated with physical attendance at meetings. It will seek to reduce those emissions by travelling only when necessary.
Preventative	The Authority governs the Fire & Rescue Service which has key preventative responsibilities. Ensuring that its meetings are effective and transparent gives direction and democratic accountability to the management of the Service.
Involvement	All meetings of the Authority and its committees are required to be open to the public unless they are considering a small range of subjects laid out in statute. Holding meetings virtually or in hybrid form and placing recordings of meetings on the website promotes transparency and enables more people to see meetings more easily.
Integration	No impact

Collaboration	Facilitating the involvement of elected councillors in Authority business helps to facilitate integration between the Authority and the 6 County/County Borough councils from which they are drawn.
A prosperous Wales	No impact.
A resilient Wales	Changing working practices and developing skills for more resilient services and communities as the population and climate changes in the long-term.
A healthier Wales	No impact
A more equal Wales	On line meetings or recordings enables more people to see meetings more easily irrespective of their availability to attend in person
A Wales of Cohesive communities	Enabling access to and participation in democratic decision making structures enhances the cohesiveness of our communities.
A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language	Ensuring all meetings are provided bilingually.
A globally responsive Wales	More digital services reduces the need for journeys and resources such as fuel and paper, reducing CO2 emissions and use of resources.

### **3.0 Format for Meetings**

- 3.1 Meetings can take a number of formats based on whether some or all of the participants are physically present. For the purposes of this policy they are defined as
- Physical meetings – all participants are, and must be, physically present in the same room
  - Hybrid meetings – some participants are physically in the same room but others may/do join the meeting using remote conferencing software (video and/or telephone)
  - Remote meetings – all participants are joining the meeting using remote conferencing software (video or telephone)

- 3.2 When Section 47 Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 is implemented physical meetings will no longer be permitted. The Authority will have to hold either hybrid or remote meetings.
- 3.3 Meetings of the Authority and its Committees (Executive Panel, Audit committee and Standards Committee) plus the Local Pension Board will take place as remote meetings for the short term, possibly until the Annual meeting in 2022. The Authority will commence hybrid meetings when it is physically safe to do so and when the Authority has the technology in place for them to function satisfactorily. The Authority is investigating the technology and resources required to hold hybrid meetings either at its own headquarters or at another location.
- 3.4 The current term of this Authority ends in May 2022 when new members will be appointed following the local government elections. The Authority will consult the new members on the preferred format and timing of meetings to ensure that its meetings are held in a manner and at a time that best suits them.
- 3.5 The Authority currently uses Zoom as its remote conferencing software. This has the capability for participation via video and telephone. The Chief Fire Officer has discretion to change the software as best suits the needs of the Authority.
- 3.6 Other meetings involving members, but which are not formal meetings of the Authority or its committees, may take place as physical, hybrid or remote meetings depending upon which format best suits the nature of the business to be undertaken. For example working groups or discussions on sensitive issues may take place as physical meetings if that is deemed to best suit the needs of the particular meeting.

#### **4.0 Attendance by Members and Quorum**

- 4.1 When a meeting takes place wholly in person it is easy to tell who is present and thus who should be recorded as being in attendance at the meeting.

- 4.2 When a meeting takes place partly on line then members will be taken as present if they have joined the remote/hybrid meeting and their camera is on. Sometimes, in cases of poor connectivity, it is necessary for participants to turn their camera off in order to enhance sound or even to dial into the meeting using a telephone link. In such circumstances, the Chair and Clerk will decide whether a person is to be treated present or not.
- 4.3 In physical meetings it is usually possible from the layout of the room to tell what role a person is fulfilling. Online that is not possible, and so councillors will be identified by the use of the prefix "Cllr" before their name and officers will have their job title after their name. Those councillors who are entitled to vote will be identified with a further asterisk against their name so that it is clear who can and cannot vote.
- 4.4 Where a member needs to declare a personal and prejudicial interest in an item, the councillors' code of conduct requires that s/he should leave the meeting during debate on that item. How this requirement will be deemed to be satisfied will depend on whether the member is physically or virtually present:
1. A member who is physically must leave the room in which the meeting is taking place during that item – simply moving to another part of the room or staying silent is not sufficient; and
  2. A member attending virtually (either at a remote or hybrid meeting) will be moved to a virtual lobby during that item where they will be unable to see or hear the debate on that item.
- 4.5 During a remote or hybrid meeting one or more people might experience connection difficulties that mean they either cannot be heard or even result in them "dropping out" of the meeting altogether. If the meeting remains quorate the Chair has the choice of whether to continue the meeting, wait for a period to enable them to reconnect or to adjourn the meeting to another time/date.

## **5.0 Chairing Meetings and voting**

- 5.1 Chairing a multi-location meeting is very different to chairing a face-to-face meeting. Chairs will need to be supported to carry out their role in specific ways. The job of the Chair will be a particular challenge where a meeting is being carried out in a physical space with only some participants joining through remote means. See also the section below on Support and Assistance during the meeting.

- 5.2 At each meeting the Chair, either in person or through the officers supporting the meeting, will:
- ensure that public observers are welcomed and that business is explained in a way that is understandable, including the operation of the multi-location meeting itself;
  - ensure before the start of the meeting that everyone is able to access the meeting, and that everyone is able to both see and hear each other (where the law requires it for specific meetings) or hear each other (for other formal meetings);
  - explain that simultaneous translation is available and that contributions are welcomed in both Welsh and English;
  - at the beginning of the meeting, introduce themselves, the committee, the key officers present and other participants to ensure that those watching or listening to a broadcast are aware who is who;
  - provide a reminder of meeting arrangements and policies, particularly relating to conduct and behaviour e.g. muting one's microphone when not speaking, how votes will be taken etc.
  - ensure that everyone has a fair opportunity to participate in the debate irrespective of whether they are physically present, on line or dialling in to the meeting;
  - check occasionally during the meeting that no one has been 'lost' due to technical issues,
  - frame the meeting with reminders of the purpose of each agenda item and, if necessary, summarise decisions prior to any vote;
  - explain the voting method to be adopted for the meeting, or, for that particular item, if it is different (e.g. in the event of a recorded vote being requested)

5.3 The method of voting at meetings will depend on the format of the meeting, the significance of the issue under debate and the level of formality. A show of hands is often impractical on remote/hybrid meetings because it can be difficult to see all persons participating in the meeting if there are several screens of participants.

5.4 The Chair, on advice from the Clerk or Chief Fire Officer, may use any of the following methods:

- 1) General assent – agreement of the members is assumed unless they indicate via the chat function or by speaking out that they wish to vote against or abstain on an item
- 2) Roll call – each councillor is asked in turn how they wish to vote

- 3) Electronic voting – the video conferencing solution may offer a voting option that will automatically tally votes for and against a motion (this function is available in Zoom), and there are voting buttons that perform a similar function in some meeting rooms (for example the Council chamber at Conwy County Borough Council's offices)
- 5.5 Where some councillors are joining by telephone it may be necessary for the chair to ask them individually how they wish to vote as other methods may not be suitable.
- 5.6 The Clerk will advise the Chair of the outcome of any vote.

## **6.0 Attendance and participation by the public**

- 6.1 All meetings of the Authority and its committees are open to the public, except when they are considering a small range of items laid down in statute (see Confidential or Exempt Information section below). Where hybrid meetings take place the date, time and place of the meeting will be published and the public will be entitled to attend the meeting in person. The access code for the meeting will also be made available.
- 6.2 Members of the public may speak at meetings of the Full Authority on issues that affect them. The following rules will apply to participation in meetings by members of the public:
  - i. Any member of the public who lives, works, volunteers or runs a business/organisation within North Wales may participate in meetings of the Full Authority in accordance with these rules;
  - ii. A member of the public may, on giving the required period of notice submit:
    - a. their intention to make representations; or
    - b. up to 3 questions (in total irrespective of the number of agenda items about which questions are to be asked) in respect of an item or items on the agenda of a forthcoming meeting of the Full Authority. When submitting notice the member of the public must give the full text of the representations to be made or question(s) to be asked

- iii. The required period of notice is set out below in clear working days before the meeting, that is not counting the day on which the representations/questions are submitted nor the day of the meeting itself.
  - a. for representations the required notice is 5 clear working days; and
  - b. for questions the required notice is 2 clear working days
- iv. The Chief Fire Officer or Clerk may refuse to accept any representations or questions where the subject matter is/appears to
  - a. be unrelated to the roles and responsibilities of the Fire Authority
  - b. be defamatory of any person
  - c. be frivolous or vexatious or offensive
  - d. be subject to threatened or current ongoing legal proceedings
  - e. require the disclosure of confidential or exempt information
  - f. relate to a formal complaint already lodged with the Authority
  - g. relate to an employee's current or previous employment with the Authority
  - h. contain an allegation against, or comments about, the conduct of individual Members or Officers;
- v. A member of the public making representations or asking questions may speak for up to 3 minutes in total (irrespective of the number of agenda items on which they wish to make representations or the number of questions they wish to ask.). The Chair may, with the agreement of that person, treat a question as having been read
- vi. A maximum of 15 minutes will be allowed at each meeting for representations and/or questions. The Chair has discretion to extend these limits
- vii. In response to a representation the Authority may either
  - a. refer the matter without debate to the Chief Fire Officer for investigation and to report back to the Authority or to one of its Committees;
  - b. take it into consideration if it relates to an item on a current or forthcoming agenda (at the time that item is to be considered); or
  - c. record the representation and take no further action.
- viii. Where one or more questions have been asked the Chair will give a verbal answer at the meeting. If the person putting the question is not in attendance then the answer will be given in writing.
- ix. Once the Chair has answered the question the person may ask one supplementary question in respect of each answer.. If a person asks more than 1 question then they may ask more than 1 supplementary question but for each must be in respect to a different answer



- x. The Chair has discretion on how representations and/or questions will be handled at the meeting in order to ensure that the business of the meeting, including the representations/questions, is handled in an effective manner. The Chair may take into account any matter when doing so but will consider such issues as the number of representations/questions, the need to consolidate representations or questions dealing with the same subject and, where relevant, the fact the Authority has been addressed recently on similar subjects.

6.3 Recordings of meetings will also be placed on the Authority's website ..

## **7.0 Confidential or Exempt Information**

- 7.1 Meetings may be held wholly or partly in private where they consider confidential or exempt information. The meeting must resolve to move into private session, and could, when considering exempt information, decide to consider the information in public provided that do to so would not breach the Authority's legal obligations (for example under data protection legislation).
- 7.2 "Confidential information" is
  - (a) information furnished to the council by a Government department upon terms (however expressed) which forbid the disclosure of the information to the public; and
  - (b) information the disclosure of which to the public is prohibited by or under any enactment or by the order of a court.
- 7.3 "Exempt information" is defined within Schedule 12A the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) and includes, for example, information that tends to identify an individual, or relates to an individual's financial affairs.
- 7.4 Where confidential information is contained within the agenda for a meeting it will not be published. Where exempt information is contained within an agenda it will not be published unless the meeting resolves to consider the issue in public in which case the Authority will make as much information publicly available as it can without breaching its legal obligations.
- 7.5 The Chief Fire Officer and/or Clerk will determine whether information is confidential or exempt for the purposes of deciding whether to publish it within an agenda or whether to supply copies to members of the public.

## **8.0 Behaviour and Conduct**

- 8.1 Due to the way in which they are held, virtual and hybrid meetings are more easily disrupted by extraneous noise than physical meetings. To ensure that meetings take place in an orderly manner and that everyone can hear what is being said all participants will be asked to keep their microphone muted until they are called to speak by the chair.
- 8.2 As mentioned above members participating in a meeting by video conference are asked to keep their cameras turned on, unless they need to turn them off to improve signal quality.
- 8.3 The video conference software for meetings includes a “chat” function. If chat is used to make points in a debate or ask questions this can be very distracting for other meeting participants and the comments/questions are not available to anyone physically present at or dialing in to the meeting.
- 8.4 The chat function should therefore be used only:
- 1) where the general assent method of voting is used, to indicate a vote against or an abstention
  - 2) to indicate apologies for arriving late to a meeting or leaving early
- 8.5 The Clerk will nevertheless monitor the chat function and advise the Chair of any comments made in the chat, and whether anyone has used it to indicate a vote against or an abstention on a proposal.
- 8.6 Any person wishing to speak at a meeting must raise their hand to indicate their intention. The Chair will call people to speak in the order of his/her choosing. It is not always easy to see when a person who is participating remotely is physically raising their hand and so the “raise hand” function within the video conference software must be used to indicate a desire to speak. Anyone dialing in to a meeting will need to verbally indicate their wish to speak, preferably without interrupting another speaker to do so.

## **9.0 Disturbance in Meetings**

- 9.1 The Meeting procedure rules for the Authority include provisions that enable the Chair to require that someone is removed from a meeting for causing a disturbance. In the case of a person attending a meeting via video conference this will take the form of them being removed from the meeting. In the case of a person physically in attendance they will be escorted from the meeting room. The chair may also adjourn a meeting in order to allow time for the disturbance to subside.
- 9.2 The Chair has discretion to readmit the person to a meeting if s/he is satisfied the person will cause no further disturbance.

## **10.0 Notices, agendas, and reports**

- 10.1 The Authority must publish the documents below in relation to the meetings covered by this protocol. The documents will be available in both Welsh and English..
- 1) public notice of the meeting (under s.100A(6A ) Local Government Act 1972) which must include the following:
    - a. where the meeting or part of the meeting is open to the public and is held through remote means only, the details of the time of the meeting and how to access it;
    - b. where the meeting will be hybrid or physical the details of the time and place of the meeting and how to access it;
    - c. where the meeting will be hybrid or physical the details of the time and place of the meeting and the fact that it is not open to the public;
    - d. where the meeting is not open to the public and is held through remote means only, give details of the time of the meeting, and the fact that it is being held through remote means only and is not open to the public.
  - 2) Copies of the agenda any report for the meeting, unless the report is likely to be considered when the meeting is not open to the public
  - 3) Any background papers as defined by S100D Local Government Act 1972 unless the Chief Fire Officer or Clerk decides that it is not reasonably practicable to publish a document included in the list electronically, in which case at least one copy of the document must be open to inspection at the offices of the Authority.

- 10.2 Public notice may be given any time but the agenda and reports must be published at least 3 clear days before the meeting at which they will be considered. If an item is added to an agenda, copies of which have been published, copies of the item or revised agenda and copies of any report for the meeting relating to the item must be published at the time the item is added to the agenda
- 10.3 A report may be considered at a meeting if it has not been published in accordance with these requirements if, by reason of special circumstances, which must be specified in the minutes, the chair of the meeting is of the opinion that the item should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency.
- 10.4 Where the whole or part of a report is not published because it will be considered when the meeting is not open to the public it must be marked "Not for publication", and it must include the relevant paragraph from Schedule 12A Local Government Act 1972 under which the Authority is likely to exclude the public during the item to which the report relates.
- 10.5 If a meeting is not held by remote means there must be made available for the use of members of the public present at the meeting a reasonable number of copies of the agenda and of the reports for the meeting for the parts of the meeting that will be held in public . Electronic copies of the agenda and reports which will be considered in public will be sent to any newspaper on request.

## **11.0 Records of Decision and Minutes**

- 11.1 After a meeting to which this protocol relates the Authority must publish the documents below. The documents will be available in both Welsh and English.
- 1) before the end of seven working days after the meeting, the Authority will publish electronically a note setting out—
    - i. the names of the members who attended the meeting, and any apologies for absence;
    - ii. any declarations of interest;
    - iii. any decision taken at the meeting, including the outcomes of any votes, but excluding anything relating to a decision taken when the meeting was not open to the public as discloses exempt information.
  - 2) the draft minutes, of the meeting, excluding the minutes of proceedings during which the meeting was not open to the public,
  - 3) a copy of the agenda for the meeting, and

- 4) a copy of so much of any report for the meeting as relates to any item during which the meeting was open to the public.

## **12.0 Training, support and technical assistance**

- 12.1 Councillors will be offered training on the use of video conference software and/or how to join meetings by dialling in. Officers will ensure that councillors
  - are able to login to a meeting online or use the dial in facility via the telephone
  - are able to use the mute/unmute, chat and raise/lower hand functions
  - consider the background that will be visible when in the meeting
- 12.2 Officers will likewise offer support to members of the public wishing to join a meeting remotely or via telephone.
- 12.3 Once a meeting has begun there is often little time to help resolve difficulties in connecting remotely. For that reason the on line session will start 15 minutes before the meeting itself to allow more scope for assistance. to be provided where necessary. If during the meeting a problem occurs officers will provide support on the use of the video conference software or with dialling in. Technical IT support will not be available during the meeting.