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REPORT

Regarding the provision of Physical Hybrid Meetings for Glynneath Town Council

PURPOSE

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RECOMMENDATIONS

PURPOSE

Following the March 2023 meeting of the Full Council, it was decided that the Clerk would undertake an investigation into the necessary equipment and logistics of providing a physical and hybrid meeting space for the meetings of Glynneath Town Council. This report aims to provide some background information, an overview of the investigations, and if necessary, recommendations for progress.

BACKGROUND

Before the current Clerk's employment, Full Council meetings took place at the Bethania Community Centre's Council Chamber, with a small number of meetings also taking place at Glynneath Town Hall. Due to the Covid19 pandemic, Welsh Government introduced a package of reforms that culminated in the production of The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Along with guidance regarding General Power of Competence, the Act also provides information to help all councils discharge their new duties in relation to the following requirements:

- Access meetings from multiple locations;
- Provide opportunity for public participation at public council meetings;

The following text in this section is copied directly from the Guidance available from:

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-08/statutory->

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*

FINDINGS

This report has primarily considered Town Council-managed assets as a first-instance provision. The main reason for this is that this report has been compiled in

one month with the aim of providing something substantial to Members as soon as possible. This does not mean that other venues cannot be considered going forwards.

The following headers were considered in this order due to the priority seeming set through the Welsh Government guidance. It should also be noted that the above Act all but halts the provision of meetings at ad hoc locations, such as the Cemetery Committee meeting at the Cemetery or the Parks and Open Spaces Committee meeting at the Welfare Park. First and foremost, all Town Council meetings *must* have multilocation provisions in order for them to be considered lawful. While this is not the purpose of this investigation, it is an item worth noting.

Technological Needs

The minimum requirement for council meetings is that members are able to hear and be heard by others.

Currently, the Council is using a USB BlueYeti microphone connected to a laptop which is then connected to a static TV via a HDMI cable. The camera is that default laptop camera, which is static.

A number of equipment upgrades could be considered for the future regarding the audio and visual provision. These include:

- Additional microphones or a system such as an OWL speaker or integrated speaker bars.
- Individual radio microphones
- A non-static camera

It should be noted that regardless of location and integration of audio capacity, any audio would be disrupted by things such as paper shuffling, drinking water, moving chairs, etc. The only way to overcome these on a realistic basis would be to consider individual radio microphones with mufflers – this is to reflect the fact that meetings are a dynamic real-life situation and not a television/film production set, where variables such as environmental disruption can be mitigated.

On this basis, should Members wish to consider a full overhaul of facilities, including microphones and non-static cameras, the costs would have to be considered along with the option of contracting a company to oversee this process and set the environment up properly. There are a number of companies that provide this service, for example the SLCC recommended CloudyIT.

However, it should also be noted that the Blue Yeti USB microphone that is being used was consistently the top rated USB microphone at the time of purchase

and is consistently in the top three at the current time. It is possible that there are other factors that are hindering any audio capacity of this equipment.

The largest concern with the provision of hybrid meetings is the capacity to utilize a good internet connection. As all meetings need to be able to be held on a multilocation basis, the connection to the internet is a non-negotiable requirement unless Members would like to utilize telephone conferencing instead.

Physical Space

Members cannot be required to attend Meetings in one specific format over others. In this instance, it must be a consideration under this heading. The Council Chamber can adequately provide space for 14 Members of the Council, and this would need to be a fixed requirement for any location for a Full Council meeting along with any seating space for the Clerk or note-taker (subject to Hybrid Meeting Protocol requirements).

Along with being a requirement, it would also need to be a contingency at all times. Members may all choose to attend meetings virtually, but the physical meeting must also allow for all Members to attend physically.

This does mean that any location would need to consider the capacity for members of the press and public with the provision that at least 15 people need to be accommodated first.

Location

There are three undercover spaces that the Town Council currently manage and which could be considered for meeting spaces. These are:

- Bethania Community Centre (Current and previous Chambers)
- Glynneath Town Hall
- Glynneath Welfare Park Pavilion

Bethania

This is currently configured for the Town Council Chamber including internet access, phone systems, and administrative facilities.

Main considerations include: lack of larger space; capacity for extra seats at the Chamber would be capped at six, spaced evenly at the rear of the room; configuration of audio needs to be considerate of tall ceilings and echo; fire escape routes are limited and a 'stay and wait' system is in operation (further limiting the capacity of the room).

Glynneath Town Hall

The main hall is the only space that has been considered for this report. This is a much larger space with good access and fire escape routes. Meetings are traditionally held in Town Halls for Councils.

Main considerations include: No current internet access; the configuration of the audio would need to be considered as having considerable echo and bounce; no other offices in the building for printing/last minute issues; main foyer works are planned to commence during the year which would disrupt council meetings; Town Hall is currently booked out for standard Council meeting nights

Welfare Park Pavilion

The Pavilion Conservatory space could be considered as a prospective venue for meetings. A larger space exists than in the Bethania Community Centre, but smaller than the Town Hall. Tuesday evenings are usually free during the tennis off-season.

Main considerations include: No current internet access; no other offices in the building for printing/last minute issues; Welfare Park transformation is planned to commence during the year which would disrupt council meetings (though potentially not until the phase regarding the Pavilion); Pavilion is booked for the nights that council meetings take place for the summer season; roof/ceiling work would need to take place before changing venue completely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members need to consider:

- Budget does not currently exist to provide for extensive overhaul or provision of hybrid meeting facilities (eg individual microphones/larger works to change the configuration of audio and video settings – for example, TV/screen provision, inbuilt microphones). Money can be vired from other budgets.
- The future-proofing of all technology. NPTCBC are currently ratifying a net zero approach throughout their Unitary Authority – what would that mean for us in terms of technology and location provision? (ie parking, paper, energy).
- The health and safety of members of the press and public, council Members, and Officers

- Which meetings would be held with a physical component?
Which meetings would not?
- For alternative locations, the administrative team would need time to make alternative arrangements for infrastructure changes – what happens in the time between?
- Capacity provision for members of the press and public
 - Will there be a priority system?
 - Are members of the public required to 'book' spaces?
 - Would council Members be required to book their own spaces in advance?
- Finally, the adoption of a hybrid meeting policy (see below)

A hybrid meeting policy would need to consider items such as:

- Whether the physical presence of the Clerk is always required (some meetings have been facilitated entirely online in the past, including a remote Clerk).
- What procedure is in place to 'book' spaces if any? What would the procedure be should the capacity be reached?
- What priorities are given for people wishing to book? Would members of the press and public be treated equally? Would priority be given to those that cannot access the meetings via the internet?
- The provision of a telephone only system (either as a back-up or as a way forwards)
- How attendance is recorded
- How potential conflicts are managed

A draft Hybrid Meeting Protocol is attached. Some items highlighted may be changed or a case to be considered:

Glynneath Town Council – Hybrid Meeting Protocol

1. Introduction

Remote meetings via Zoom have been used during the Covid-19 pandemic in accordance with the temporary legislation.

The Council has therefore put in place arrangements which will enable meetings to take place in compliance with legislation whilst providing alternative participation . All are asked to remember that the Council's offices at Bethania Community Centre – they are the place of employment for many and there are implications beyond just how the meetings are held for staff health and safety, physical and mental.

The arrangements set out in this Protocol will apply to meetings from [insert date]. At the date of this Protocol, it is expected that arrangements may change in accordance with Council decisions regarding locations or even provision (subject to legislation).

2. Hybrid arrangements – how will they work?

The primary objective is to ensure that meetings can continue as safely as possible and that the rights of Members and the Public are not diminished simply because the meeting is being held through a mix of online and face-to-face means. The Chairman will retain control and discretion over the conduct of the meeting and the Zoom host will provide administrative support to facilitate the meeting.

Please note that, exceptionally, meeting arrangements may change – in response to legislation, court decisions, or risk. This may include a meeting being postponed, or the hybrid arrangements changing or being withdrawn. We ask that you check the arrangements in advance of joining or attending the meeting.

(a) Other Members, Officers and the Public

The Council will use Zoom to enable all other Members, officers and the Public to attend and participate in meetings safely. Zoom will be enabled in all public meetings. Those attending the meeting physically will be able to see and hear Zoom participants via the existing large TV/monitor screens in the meeting rooms.

Those on Zoom will be able to hear Members in the room – there will be a whole room view and there will be no zooming in on individual members. It is essential therefore those Members present in the room use the microphones at all times and identify themselves before speaking.

There will be an Officer in the room – the Clerk or other delegated Officer. There may also be a meeting room host to manage the safety of the meeting.

3. Zoom

Zoom is the system the Council will be using for those attending Hybrid meetings remotely. It has functionality for audio, video, and screen sharing and you do not need to be a member of the Council or have a Zoom account to join a Zoom meeting.

4. Access to documents

The Clerk will publish the agenda and reports for committee meetings on the Council's website in line with usual practice. Paper copies of agendas will only be made available to those who have previously requested this and also the Chair of a meeting.

If any other Member wishes to have a paper copy, they must notify the Clerk before the agenda is published, so they can arrange to post directly – it may take longer to organise printing, so as much notice as possible is appreciated.

The Public should continue to access agendas via the Council's website - and are encouraged to do so.

5. Setting up the Meeting for Zoom attendance

This will be done by an Officer. They will send a meeting request via Outlook which will appear in Members' Outlook calendar. Members and Officers will receive a URL link to click on to join the meeting. The Public will use the Zoom details on the front of the agenda. The telephone dial-in via Zoom will also be available.

6. Public Access and Participation

(a) Public Access:

Members of the Public will be able to use a web link and standard internet browser. This will be displayed on the front of the agenda. Members of the Public should attend a meeting via Zoom, unless there are exceptional circumstances justifying attendance in person.

If any member of the Public still wishes to attend in person, they must notify an Officer **at least 3 working days before the meeting**. Notifications must be sent by email to: clerk@glynneathtowncouncil.gov.uk

Day of meeting	Notice given by
Monday	Previous Wednesday
Tuesday	Previous Thursday
Wednesday	Previous Friday
Thursday	Monday
Friday	Tuesday

(b) Public Participation (speaking):

Public questions will continue in line with the Council's current arrangements as far as is practicable. However, to ensure that the meeting runs smoothly and that no member of the public is missed, all those who wish to speak must register **by 4pm on the day before the meeting**. They should email their full name to clerk@glynneathtowncouncil.gov.uk. If they wish to circulate their question in advance, that would be helpful.

At public question time, the Chair will ask each registered person to speak at the appropriate time. In the normal way, the public should state their full name, the agenda item they wish to speak to **before** they proceed with their question. Unless they have registered, a member of the public may not be called to speak, except at the discretion of the Chairman.

If a member of the public wishes to ask a question but cannot attend the meeting for whatever reason, there is nothing to prevent them from contacting the Clerk via telephone or email.

7. Arrangements for any person attending meetings at Bethania Community Centre

Anyone attending a meeting in person must observe the following requirements:

- (a) For non-voting members, officers and the Public – please notify the Clerk in advance. It is essential that the Council knows who is attending and how many will be in the room, so that the meeting risk assessment can be updated.
- (b) Do not attend if you: have any symptoms of Covid-19; are self-isolating (with or without a positive Covid-19 test); or are in a period of post-travel quarantine. If you are suffering with any contagious illness or cold, please refrain from attending.
- (c) Use the hand sanitiser which is available in the building.
- (d) Follow the directions for entering, moving around and exiting the building. Follow the instructions of any Officer present to manage the safety of the

meeting and/or the Chairman.

- (e) Sign into the meeting if requested to do so – you may be asked to leave contact details
- (f) Enter and leave the building promptly – do not gather inside after the meeting has finished, or during any break in the meeting

8. Starting the Meeting

At the start of the meeting, the Clerk will check all required attendees are present and that there is a quorum. If there is no quorum, the meeting will be adjourned. This applies if, during the meeting, it becomes inquorate for whatever reason.

The Chair will remind all Members, Officers and the Public attending via Zoom that **all microphones must be muted**, unless and until they are speaking. This prevents background noise, coughing etc. which is intrusive and disruptive during the meeting. The Hosting Officer will enforce this and will be able to turn off participant mics when they are not in use.

9. Declaration of Interests

Members should declare their interests in the usual way. A Member with a disclosable pecuniary interest is required to leave the room. If they are attending via Zoom, they will be moved to the waiting room for the duration of the item.

10. The Meeting and Debate

- (a) For Members and Officers physically present

Each member should raise their hand to indicate a request to speak. When called, they must identify themselves for the recording and for the benefit of those attending via Zoom. The microphone must be used when speaking – standing will make it difficult for those on Zoom to hear and is discouraged, including at meetings of Full Council.

- (b) For any person attending via Zoom

The Council will not be using the Chat function. The Chairman will call speakers in

accordance with the usual rules i.e. either at Public Question Time, or for Members and Officers, when they raise their Zoom hand to speak.

No decision or outcome will be invalidated by a failure of the Chair to call a member to speak – remote management of meetings is intensive and the Hybrid arrangements are likely to be more so. It is reasonable to expect that some requests will be inadvertently missed from time to time.

When referring to reports or making specific comments, Members and Officers should refer to the report and page number whenever possible. This will help all present or in attendance to have a clear understanding of what is being discussed.

11. Voting

Voting for meetings in person is normally through a show of hands. This will also apply to Members voting via Zoom (electronic hand or physical hand). The Clerk will announce the numerical result of the vote for the benefit of those attending via Zoom.

12. Meeting Etiquette Reminder for Zoom attendees

- Mute your microphone – you will still be able to hear what is being said.
- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.
- Speak clearly and please state your name each time you speak
- If you're referring to a specific page, mention the page number.

13. Part 2 Reports and Debate

There are times when council meetings are not open to the public, when confidential, or “exempt” issues – as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 – are under consideration.

If there are members of the public and press attending the meeting, then the Clerk will, at the appropriate time, remove them to a waiting room for the duration of that item. They can then be invited back in when the business returns to Part 1.

Please turn off smart speakers such as Amazon Echo (Alexa), Google Home or smart music devices. These could inadvertently record phone or video conversations, which would not be appropriate during the consideration of confidential items.

14. Interpretation of standing orders

Where the Chairman is required to interpret the Council's Constitution and procedural rules and how they apply to remote attendance, they may take advice from the Clerk or Monitoring Officer prior to making a ruling. However, the Chair's decision shall be final.

15. Disorderly Conduct by Members

If a Member behaves in the manner as outlined in the Constitution (persistently ignoring or disobeying the ruling of the Chair or behaving irregularly, improperly or offensively or deliberately obstructs the business of the meeting), any other Member may move 'That the member named be not further heard' which, if seconded, must be put to the vote without discussion.

If the same behaviour persists and a Motion is approved 'that the member named do leave the meeting', then (if attending via Zoom) they will be removed as a participant by the Member Services Officer.

16. Disturbance from Members of the Public

If any member of the public interrupts a meeting the Chairman will warn them accordingly. If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Chairman may ask the Officer to remove them as a participant from the meeting.

17. Technical issues – meeting management

If the Chairman, the Hosting Officer or any Officer identifies a problem with the systems from the Council's side, the Chairman should either declare a recess while the fault is addressed or, if the fault is minor (e.g. unable to bring up a presentation), it may be appropriate to move onto the next item of business in order to progress through the agenda. If it is not possible to address the fault, the meeting will be adjourned until such time as it can be reconvened.

If the meeting was due to determine an urgent matter and it has not been possible to continue because of technical difficulties, the Clerk, in consultation with the Monitoring Officer or One Voice Wales, shall explore such other means of taking the decision as may be permitted by the Council's Standing Orders.

Where any Member, Officer or the Public experience their own technical problems during the course of a meeting e.g. through internet connectivity or otherwise, the meeting will not be automatically suspended or adjourned.

18. Technical issues – Individual Responsibility (Members and Officers)

Many members, officers and the Public live in places where broadband speeds are poor, but technical issues can arise at any time for a number of reasons. The following guidelines, if followed, should help reduce disruption.

- Join public Zoom meetings by telephone if there is a problem with the internet. Before all meetings, note down or take a photograph of the front page of the agenda which has the necessary telephone numbers. Annex 1 to this protocol contains a brief step-by-step guide to what to expect
- Consider an alternative location from which to join the meeting, but staying safe and keeping confidential information secure. For officers, this may mean considering whether to come into the office, subject to this being safe and practicable (childcare etc.)
- Have to hand the telephone number of someone attending the meeting – and contact them if necessary to explain the problem in connecting
- Officers should have an ‘understudy’ or deputy briefed and on standby to attend and present as needed (and their telephone numbers to hand)

Annex 1

Phone only access to zoom meetings

(Before you start **make sure you know the Meeting ID and the Meeting Password**) – Both of these are available on the agenda for the meeting

Call the toll free number either on the meeting agenda or on the Outlook appointment (this will start with 0800 -----)

(Ensure your phone is on 'speaker' if you can)

A message will sound saying *"Welcome to Zoom, enter your meeting ID followed by the hash button"*

- **Enter Meeting ID followed by #**

Wait for next message which will say *"If you are a participant, please press hash to continue"*

- **Press #**

Wait for next message which will say *"Enter Meeting Password followed by hash"*

- **Enter 6 digit Meeting Password followed by #**

Wait for the following two messages:

"You are currently being held in a waiting room, the Host will release you from 'hold' in a minute"

Wait.....

"You have now entered the meeting"

Important notes for participating in meetings

Press ***6** to toggle between **'mute' and 'unmute'** (you should always ensure you are muted until you are called upon to speak)

If you wish to speak you can **'raise your hand'** by pressing ***9**. Wait for the Chairman to call you to speak. The Host will lower your hand after you have spoken. Make sure you mute yourself afterwards.