



Un Llais Cymru



One Voice Wales

**Section 47 Multi Locations Meetings  
Sector Survey 2021**



# Remote Working Survey

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## Executive Summary

This survey on Section 47 Multi Location Meetings for Community and Town Councils was conducted by One Voice Wales due to several concerns raised by Councils following the introduction of legislation by Welsh Government requiring all Councils holding face to face meetings to have the facility for multi-location meetings with effect from May 2021. Without this facility, the legislation specifies that Councils should meet only remotely. A bilingual survey on survey monkey was undertaken via an email sent to all 735 Community and Town Councils in Wales on 3 November with a closing date of 26 November 2021. The survey asked a number of factual questions regarding the holding of multi-location meetings in light of the Section 47 Welsh Government Multi Location Meetings regulations passed by the Welsh Government. Detailed results are available in the Appendix.

A total of 277 Community and Town Councils responded to the survey which is 37.68 % of the current Councils in Wales. This is about average for email surveys since they usually secure between 25-33% response rates. This is a lower level of engagement than in other email surveys undertaken by One Voice Wales in the last 18 months and although a good indicator the results may not capture the full picture in terms of the views and opinions of Councils across Wales on the level of use of

multi-location meetings, costs involved, their benefits and disbenefits and issues facing Councils in implementing them.

Just over half of respondents (55.43%) were meeting remotely, less than 20% meeting on a multi-location basis (18.84%) and a quarter (25.7%) meeting by other means. This indicates a very low take up currently for multi-location meetings. When asked about the preferred method for holding meetings (Q4), less than a half of respondents preferred multi-locations meetings (46.91%), 18.91% preferred remote only, while over a third (34.18%) preferred meeting by other means (ie face-to-face).

Respondents not holding multi-locations meetings were asked what was preventing them from doing so. Over half stated that this was due to lack of broadband facilities (57.08%), followed by lack of finance to install facilities (45.42%), lack of knowledge as to how to create multi-location facilities (41.67%), poor wi-fi reception in the community (40%). A third of respondents (33.75%) also mentioned other reasons including: remaining on-line at present to support vulnerable members of the community due to the pandemic; mandatory wearing of face masks making communication difficult; currently setting up facilities; many councillors not having the technical skills and/or wifi facilities; the meeting room not owned by the Council; the need for impartial advice on appropriate facilities and set up.

Two thirds of respondents holding multi-location meetings agreed with the following benefits:

- People who are not comfortable with remote meetings can attend on a face-to-face basis
- Enables those with health issues to attend
- Enables people to attend in the case of inclement weather
- Enables people with caring responsibilities to attend
- Enables people working away from home to attend

With a half also agreeing:

- Enables Higher attendance levels
- Enables people who are away on holiday to attend

In terms of set-up costs of multi-location meetings, the vast majority had spent less than £500 on these (70.30%). However, for those who did not have the facility for multi-location meetings, over half had not yet identified the costs involved, with only 10% expecting to pay less than £500 and 17% expecting to pay over £2,000.

There is no denying the value which multi-location meetings can bring as an opportunity for Councils to bring their workings into the modern world. Many Councils have been able to implement Section 47 without issue. However, the survey has raised important questions regarding the legislation and its implementation as what appears to be a “one size fits all” approach which is not necessarily proportionate bearing in mind the different circumstances of Community

and Town Councils across Wales. These matters include the greater impact on smaller Councils and those without access to appropriate resources including effective broadband. The legislation has been passed without due consideration as to the practicality/logistics of making multi-location meetings a requirement for all Councils. There has been no adequate provision to enable planning for a transition period accompanied by a lack of communication, consultation and information to Councils on its implementation. There has been a lack of appreciation that many Community and Town Councils do not have the infrastructure or staffing knowledge and support to bring in a permanent, extremely challenging change of this nature so quickly. In effect the legislation threatens to prevent face-to-face meetings unless Councils have the facility to offer the multi-location facility. Many councillors would like to return to physical meetings but have continued with remote meetings as current requirements of section 47 cannot be complied with. Some Councils have also returned to physical meetings without having the facility for multi-location meetings and are therefore non-compliant with the legislation. A transition period with a planning window would have been better. However, even with such a transition period, the requirement to have multi-location meetings will be problematical and not possible for many Councils at present for logistical reasons as outlined in the responses. Given where we are, further clarity from Welsh Government would be helpful as to how these issues can be resolved. While many issues can be addressed by training, support, financial resources, availability of hardware, others are more difficult to resolve e.g. when a Council does not own its meeting room and there is lack of effective infrastructure and internet connection to have a workable solution.

## Background and Objectives

This survey on Section 47 Multi Location Meetings for Community and Town Councils was conducted by One Voice Wales due to several concerns raised by Councils following the introduction of legislation by Welsh Government requiring all Councils holding face to face meetings to have the facility for multi-location meetings with effect from May 2021. Without this facility, the legislation specifies that Councils should meet only remotely. Specifically, concerns raised relate to the costs involved in meeting these new requirements, poor broadband reception in certain parts of Wales as well as the practical difficulties involved in ensuring that premises used for meetings can support telephone or video conferencing. The results of the survey are intended to assist OVW to fully understand the issues being faced by the sector in order to effectively pursue dialogue with the Minister for Finance and Local Government and civil servants in relation to implementation of Section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

## Methodology

A bilingual survey on survey monkey was undertaken via an email sent to all 735 Community and Town Councils in Wales on 6 November with a closing date of 26 November 2021. The survey asked a number of factual questions regarding the

holding of multi-location meetings in light of the Section 47 Welsh Government Multi Location Meetings regulations passed by the Welsh Government. Section 47 legislation requires Councils who are holding face to face meetings to have the facility for multi-location meetings, or otherwise Councils should meet only remotely. It included questions on:

- the name of the Council and level of precept
- what basis Councils were currently holding their meetings, and if multi-location meetings were not being held, what was preventing Councils from doing so
- the preferred method of holding Council meetings
- set up costs for multi-location meetings already being held
- estimated costs of setting up multi-location meetings if not holding multi-location meetings
- the benefits of holding multi-location meetings
- the disbenefits of holding multi-location meetings
- any other observations relating to multi-location meetings.

## Results

### 1. Respondent Information

A total of 277 Community and Town Councils responded to the survey which is 37.68 % of the current Councils in Wales. This is about average for email surveys since they usually secure between 25-33% response rates. This is a lower level of engagement than in other email surveys undertaken by One Voice Wales in the last 18 months and although a good indicator the results may not capture the full picture in terms of the views and opinions of Councils across Wales on the level of use of multi-location meetings, costs involved, their benefits and disbenefits and issues facing Councils in implementing them.

### 2. Format of Current Council Meetings

Respondents were asked to indicate on what basis their Council was currently holding its meetings (Q3). Just over half of respondents (55.43%) were meeting remotely, less than 20% meeting on a multi-location basis (18/84%) and a quarter (25.7%) meeting by other means. This indicates a very low take up currently for multi-location meetings.

### 3. Preferred method for holding meetings

When asked about the preferred method for holding meetings (Q4), less than a half of respondents preferred multi-locations meetings (46.91), 18.91% preferred remote only, while just over a third (34.18%) preferred meeting by other means, being face to face in person in one physical location.

#### **4. Reason for not holding multi-location meetings**

Respondents not holding multi-locations meetings were asked what was preventing them from doing so (Q5) – 240 respondents answered this question. Over half stated that this was due to lack of broadband facilities (57.08%), followed by lack of finance to install facilities (45.42%), lack of knowledge as to how to create multi-location facilities (41.67%), poor wi-fi reception in the community (40%). A third of respondents (33.75%) also mentioned other reasons including:

- To remain on-line at present to support vulnerable members of the community due to the pandemic
- Mandatory wearing of masks indoors for public meetings due to covid restrictions makes it impractical for communication
- Lack of interest from the community
- Meeting room too small for safe social distancing
- Equipment not installed yet
- Currently receiving advice on set up
- Some Councils move around community for meetings and some buildings have no Wi-Fi
- Meeting room not owned by Council
- The need for impartial technical advice on how to set up
- Many Councillors want face to face meetings
- Some Councillors do not have the digital skills
- Some Councillors do not have wifi

#### **5. Set up costs for multi-location meetings**

Respondents were asked to indicate the set ups costs for holding multi-locations meetings (Q6). 101 respondents replied. The vast majority had spent less than £500 on set up costs (70.30%) with the remainder spending as follows:

£501-£1000	= 5.94%
£1001-£1500	= 7.92%
£1501-£2000	= 7.92%
Over £2000	= 7.92%

#### **6. Estimated costs for future set up of multi-location meetings**

Respondents not holding multi-location meetings were given the opportunity to state whether they had estimated the costs of setting up these meetings in future. Half of respondents (113 of the 226 respondents) had not costed this option. The others noted varied costs as follows:

Less than £500	= 10.18%
£501 - £1000	= 11.06%
£1001 - £1500	= 6.64%

£1501 - £2000	= 4.87%
Over £2000	= 17.26%

These figures differ a lot to Q6 above – more % expecting to spend over £2,000 while only 10% expecting to pay less than £500 (compared to 70% in Q6).

## 7. The benefits of holding multi-location meetings

When asked about the benefits of holding multi-location meetings (Q8) 272 responses were received. Respondents were asked to tick all that applied. The results are as follows:

People who are not comfortable with remote meetings can attend on a face-to-face basis	82.35%
Enables those with health issues to attend	76.84%
Enables people to attend in the case of inclement weather	73.16%
Enables people with caring responsibilities to attend	72.79%
Enables people working away from home to attend	65.44%
Higher attendance levels	58.08%
Enables people who are away on holiday to attend	50.74%
Other benefits	18.01%

Other benefits included:

- Allowing Council work to continue during the pandemic
- Those shielding can attend
- Hopefully more engagement with the public
- Ability to record for purpose of minutes accuracy
- Provides more flexibility
- Residents in all areas can attend
- Convenience and travel cost savings

## 8. The disbenefits of holding multi-location meetings

When asked about the disbenefits of holding multi-locations meetings (Q9) 259 responses were received. The results are as follows:

Difficulty for Chair in chairing meetings	65.25%
Difficulty for members engaging with discussions	63.71%
Difficulty as the premises is not owned by the Council	49.03%
Difficulty in managing voting arrangements	48.65%
Difficulty in setting up the meetings and managing the set up	44.40%
Difficulty in setting up translation facilities	30.89%

Other disbenefits	24.32%
Difficulty in preparing accurate minutes	22.39%

Other disbenefits included:

- Concerns about technical issues
- Cost and lack of technical expertise
- No or inadequate broadband/wifi coverage
- Many Councillors do not have broadband/facilities
- Increase in officer time to support meetings – small Councils only employ a Clerk for a few hours and this could eat into that time quite significantly
- Storage and transport of extra equipment when building not owned by the Council
- Can be difficult for members of the public accessing the meetings
- Does not enhance the purpose of the meeting
- Not practical for community business
- Difficult to discuss planning applications
- There is no interest from the general public to warrant the expense and inconvenience of setting up remote facilities
- Losing an opportunity to socialise informally
- Meetings are no longer local

## **9. Other observations relating to multi-location meetings**

When asked about any other observations relating to multi-location meetings (Q10), 138 responses were received. The majority of respondents raised concerns relating to multi-location meetings and that due to a variety of reasons multi-location meetings are just not possible for many councils at present.

In summary, the concerns highlight that Section 47 appears to be a “one size fits all” approach which is not necessarily proportionate bearing in mind the different circumstances of Community and Town Councils across Wales. These matters include the greater impact on smaller Councils and those without access to appropriate resources including effective broadband. Issues of concern raised:

- legislation has been passed without due consideration as to the practicality of making multi-location meetings possible, no provision to enable councils to plan for the transition and the lack of communication, consultation and information to councils about this topic and the logistics of its implementation. There has been a lack of appreciation that many Community and Town councils do not have the



infrastructure or staffing knowledge and support to bring in a permanent, extremely challenging change of this nature so quickly. In effect the legislation threatens to prevent face-to-face meetings unless Councils have the facility to offer the multi-location facility. Many councillors would like to return to physical meetings but have continued with remote meetings as current requirements of section 47 cannot be complied with. A transition period with a planning window would have been better. However, even with a transition period, the requirement to have multi-location meetings will be problematical and not possible for many Councils for logistical reasons;

- the legislation should be enabling rather than mandatory; Welsh Government should allow Councils to be as flexible as possible and not impose unworkable conditions upon the sector;
- technical issues due to lack of effective broadband in rural areas being problematical and intermittent connectivity during meetings;
- lack of IT knowledge and equipment to enable members to access meetings, broadband and/or service line faults;
- many Councils would welcome guidance on platforms and suppliers due to the time required to research and set up a system;
- the need for ongoing training and support for Clerks and Councillors;
- set up for hybrid meetings time-consuming;
- problems when not Council owned buildings;
- hampers moving around for meetings due to technical matters;
- that no support has been given to 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;
- lack of engagement by the public;
- difficulty in effective chairing of meetings;
- stifling discussion. Loss of social contact and spontaneous discussions before and after meetings, thereby affecting social cohesion; Discussions are more effective in face-to-face meetings;
- difficult to manage the voting process;
- difficult to prepare the minutes;
- natural resistance to change and operating differently: 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;
- chairing meetings being more difficult, particularly when some Councillors do not use video conferencing but phone in, thus making it a challenge to manage the voting system and knowing when

Councillors wish to contribute to discussions. Background noise during meetings is an issue if microphones are not muted;

- issues with the discussion of highly disputed agenda items and that these would be better conducted face-to-face;
- the logistics of providing translation facilities and costs;
- signing of cheques more difficult;

#### Benefits of multi-location meetings

- great if it can be implemented;
- a fantastic opportunity for Councils bringing workings into the modern world. However, it would have been better to be given 12 months notice to plan this change, budget and research suitable options;
- make it easier as well as cost effective to get all the stakeholders at one place without compelling them to move out of their office or home;
- enables a higher level of attendance;
- business transacted more effectively;
- enables Councils to continue with their business during the pandemic crisis;
- a very positive addition to the work of town councils in Wales, enabling a more inclusive attendance at council meetings;
- maybe it will enhance participation in local democracy, by encouraging more people to stand for election as Councillors and help in diversifying membership and attracting new members by those who may have found physical attendance difficult;
- helps to enhance and support local democracy; makes it easier for the public to attend meetings;
- environmental benefits with reduction in carbon emission and avoiding unnecessary travel time;
- Mitigating the effect of extenuating circumstances e.g. the pandemic and bad weather in winter months which can affect attendance at physical meetings, particularly in rural areas;

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

There is no denying the value which multi-location meetings can bring as an opportunity for Councils to bring their workings into the modern world. Many Councils have been able to implement Section 47 without issue. However, the survey has raised important questions regarding the legislation and its implementation as what appears to be a “one size fits all” approach which is not necessarily proportionate bearing in mind the different circumstances of Community and Town Councils across Wales. These matters include the greater impact on smaller Councils and those without access to appropriate resources including effective broadband. The legislation has been passed without due consideration as

to the practicality/logistics of making multi-location meetings a requirement for all Councils. There has been no adequate provision to enable planning for a transition period and the lack of communication, consultation and information to Councils on its implementation. There has been a lack of appreciation that many Community and Town Councils do not have the infrastructure or staffing knowledge and support to bring in a permanent, extremely challenging change of this nature so quickly. In effect the legislation threatens to prevent face-to-face meetings unless Councils have the facility to offer the multi-location facility. Many councillors would like to return to physical meetings but have continued with remote meetings as current requirements of section 47 cannot be complied with. Some Councils have also returned to physical meetings without having the facility for multi-location meetings and are therefore non-compliant with the legislation. A transition period with a planning window would have been better. However, even with such a transition period, the requirement to have multi-location meetings will be problematical and not possible for many Councils at present for logistical reasons as outlined in the responses. Given where we are, further clarity from Welsh Government would be helpful as to how these issues can be resolved. While many issues can be addressed by training, support, financial resources, availability of hardware, others are more difficult to resolve e.g. when a Council does not own its meeting room and there is lack of effective infrastructure and internet connection to have a workable solution.

## Thanks

One Voice Wales is very appreciative of the time Councils have taken in responding to the questionnaire survey. The results of the survey are intended to assist OVW to fully understand the issues being faced by the sector in order to effectively pursue dialogue with the Minister for Finance and Local Government and civil servants in relation to implementation of Section 47 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

## **ABOUT ONE VOICE WALES**

One Voice Wales is the national representative organisation for Community and Town Councils throughout Wales. The vision subscribed to by One Voice Wales is:

*“Working with local councils in Wales to shape places communities want to live in”*

One Voice Wales aims to support Community and Town Councils in achieving this vision and has adopted the following Mission Statement to guide its work:

*“To represent the interests of Community and Town Councils; raise awareness and understanding of this primary tier of government; and work collaboratively with our partners to ensure the sector contributes fully to the goal of developing dynamic and sustainable communities in Wales.”*

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