

QUESTIONS AT ANY TIME TO CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

Question From: County Councillor Pete Roberts
Subject: Blended meetings
Question To: County Councillor Beverley Baynham
Portfolio Holder for Corporate
Governance & Regulatory Services

Question to Portfolio Holder 10 September 2021
Response published 21 September 2021

With infection rates in Powys now exceeding 400/100k for the first time and the evidence of vaccine escape becoming clearer by the day will the portfolio holder reassure me that we will only be returning to the chamber when a fully tested system that will allow hybrid meetings to occur has been implemented. Will they agree with me that to do otherwise would be detrimental to our position under equalities legislation due to its impact on members where either they or members of their household are clinically vulnerable or unable to receive a vaccine on health grounds?

Response by the Portfolio Holder:

Thank you for your question regarding Blended Meetings.

With the current Covid infection rates in the county continuing to increase, the current advice from Welsh Government remains to be that where possible everyone should continue to work from home and the Council is following that advice. As the First Minister said in his statement on Friday 17 September “aside from vaccination, one of the most effective ways we can help to control the spread of coronavirus is by working from home.”

In addition, social distancing rules continue to be in place in Council buildings with a requirement to wear face masks in communal areas as well as following hygiene rules. As an example of the effect of social distancing on meeting rooms, the maximum number of people that could potentially meet in the Chamber at County Hall would be 19, which means that most committees (Members and officers) could not be accommodated safely.

There is a requirement for a risk assessment to be undertaken for those attending Council buildings and that would be required to be undertaken by the officer meeting with Members at a building.

The Council, following the receipt of a grant from Welsh Government has ordered equipment for the Chamber at County Hall which will mean that there will be a possibility of hybrid meetings being held whereby some Councillors and officers could meet physically in the Chamber at County Hall with other Members and officers joining the meeting remotely from home or other locations. However, the Council has been advised that as there is a high demand for such equipment at present the earliest that this can be installed would be in early January 2022. Following the installation officers will need time to learn and test the hybrid solution before it can be utilised.

Finally, the Council is considering new ways of working following the pandemic and how lessons learned can be carried forward into the future operation of the Council and this will impact on staff and Members. Therefore, there will need to be engagement with Members about what such a new operating model would look like, and it is anticipated that this discussion might commence at the end of this year.