

**REPORT OF ADMINISTRATION & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES MANAGER AND
DEPUTY MONITORING OFFICER**

SUBJECT: VIRTUAL MEETINGS VIA 'LIFESIZE'

Purpose of Report

To seek Members' views on convening virtual meetings of the Authority and its Committees via 'Lifesize'.

Introduction

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic Welsh Ministers, following the passing of legislation by the UK Government, have introduced The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 ("the Regulations"). The Regulations provide the framework within which the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority can convene virtual meetings of the Authority and its Committees using video and/or telephone conferencing software.

Implications of the new legislation

The Regulations came into force on 22 April 2020 and they put in place the provisions for local authorities, National Park Authorities, Fire & Rescue Authorities and other bodies to hold meetings completely via electronic means¹. This means, in effect that, provided the video conferencing package used "enables persons who are not in the same place to speak to and be heard by each other (whether or not the equipment or facility also enables those persons to see each other)", the Authority will be able to continue to convene its calendar of meetings, albeit remotely. The Regulations are in place until 01 May 2021.

Lifesize

The Authority, along with the other 14 UK National Park Authorities, has invested in a video conferencing software package called 'Lifesize', and officers have successfully convened several internal meetings via this platform since the COVID-19 lockdown. In addition, a number of meetings have been held between small groups of Members in order for them to become familiar with the package and, during those meetings, Members indicated a willingness to participate in virtual meetings. It is a relatively simple system to use and meetings can be accessed via a link sent to all Members.

Public access to meetings

While the Regulations do not require local authorities to make provision for any member of the public to be able to attend any meetings held in the current circumstances, some Members have raised concerns about this perceived lack of engagement.

¹ Section 4 of The Local Government Measure 2011 provided for some Members to attend a local authority meeting remotely, provided that no less than 30% of the membership was present at the venue. However, this legislation did not apply to National Park Authorities

With this in mind, it is possible for members of the public to be invited, through an assigned passcode, to participate in a meeting (e.g. to speak on a planning application at Development Management Committee), and the Lifesize system has controls in place to override a participant's microphone and mute them if necessary and, in extreme circumstances, to remove a participant from the meeting. This and/or other options may be something that will need to be considered further by officers should Members wish to allow public speaking to continue at virtual meetings of the Development Management Committee.

However, in order for members of the public to be able to observe a meeting only, the Authority would have to live stream the meeting over the internet. This would mean that only those who need to participate in the meeting (i.e. Members and officers) are in the "meeting room", and all other persons wishing to observe the meeting are directed to the live stream and therefore cannot interact with the meeting. Meetings can also be recorded as they happen and could be made available on the Authority's website for a specified period after the event.

Financial considerations

The Authority has already signed up to using the Lifesize package, therefore no additional cost is envisaged. In addition, there will be a cost saving to the Authority in the fact that no travelling expenses need to be claimed by Members.

Risk considerations

1. Democracy lies at the heart of local government and this works via Members' ability to debate issues in the public domain. Not convening meetings of the Authority until the current pandemic ends could possibly result in more decisions having to be undertaken by the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chair of the Authority, under delegated powers. In addition, some planning applications may not be able to be determined, resulting in undue delay for applicants and possible Appeals against the Authority for non-determination of planning applications.
2. Inviting members of the public to participate/observe meetings has resulted in some local authorities having to abort their meeting as a result of inappropriate behaviour and/or language on the part of the public. However, with the appropriate security measures in place, such instances should be avoidable.

Compliance

The convening of any virtual meetings would be undertaken in accordance with The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020.

Human Rights/Equality issues

The live streaming of any virtual meetings would provide members of the public with easier access to meetings of the Authority while minimising the need to travel and allowing more flexible viewing times.

Biodiversity implications/Sustainability appraisal

Holding virtual meetings would decrease overall travel to meetings and therefore decrease the Authority's carbon footprint.

Welsh Language statement

The Authority's papers will continue to be published in accordance with Welsh Language Standards.

Conclusion

In order to be able to continue to undertake democratic decisions, it will be necessary to convene virtual meetings via the Lifesize system until the Authority is able to return to holding "face to face" meetings. Members also need to decide whether they wish to allow public participation at Development Management Committee and whether they wish to allow members of the public to be able to observe any meetings held while the current situation continues.

RECOMMENDATION:

That, while the current advice to ensure social distancing and avoid "face to face" meetings continues, Members agree:

- 1. To endorse the decision of the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Chairman, to convene virtual meetings of the Authority and its Committees via Lifesize, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020;**
- 2. To continue with the practice of allowing public participation at Development Management Committee, and**
- 3. To live stream virtual meetings of the Authority and its Committees.**

Background Documents

None

(For further information, please contact Janet Evans, Administration & Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer on extension 4834, or by emailing janete@pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk)

Author: Janet Evans, Administration & Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer

Consultees: Tegryn Jones, Chief Executive; Nicola Gandy, Director of Planning and Park Direction; Michael Kent, Monitoring Officer