**WRITTEN STATEMENT**

**BY**

**THE WELSH GOVERNMENT**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TITLE**  | **Local Authority meetings and the Digital Democracy Fund**  |
| **DATE**  | **09 March 2021**  |
| **BY** | **Julie James, Minister for Housing and Local Government** |

A fundamental principle of local democracy is every person has the right and the opportunity to be involved in the structures and processes that impact on their lives. Developments in digital technology offer new and different opportunities for individuals to actively participate in their communities while enabling more flexible arrangements for local authorities to operate in different ways. I know that many local authorities are already making excellent use of digital technology in service delivery.

However, there is also the opportunity to exploit the use of digital methods and tools to support greater engagement in democratic processes in terms of both democratic representation and citizen involvement. The Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated how important it is that we embrace this approach and transform democracy and create an environment where barriers to participation are removed, solutions are developed and benefits realised.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the difficulties in relying on traditional ways of working within local government and the restrictions that arise from the lack of digital interaction between electors and those elected to represent them.

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (The 2021 Act) has, at its core, the principles of democracy, transparency and accountability to the citizens of Wales. There are a number of provisions which are fundamental to greater transparency and openness between local councils and communities including arrangements for multi-location meetings.

Local Authorities have made significant efforts to enable meetings to take place throughout this pandemic. This has included providing training and awareness sessions to ensure individuals felt well enough supported to enter, what for many, was a very different world. Some councils were able to embrace multi-location meetings more quickly than others. My expectation has always been the majority of routine meetings should happen remotely both during the pandemic restrictions and in many cases once the restrictions are lifted. I have said on many occasions that the challenges officers and members needed to overcome to ensure meetings took place cannot and should not be underestimated. The meetings have enabled business to continue in a legal and safe way; showing the importance of good governance, strong accountability, proportionality and flexibility.

Throughout the pandemic a number of you have raised concerns about the number and type of council meetings that have been taking place. During April and September 2020 my officials undertook an analysis of the local authority meetings being held across Wales. This information is attached to this statement (Annex A). Since then the number and type of meetings held has continued to increase across Wales.

Alongside the efforts made by local authorities there are some issues that need to be addressed to enable councils to continue to maximise flexibility when making arrangements for meetings.

As part of the allocations made from the Welsh Government Reserves for Reconstruction package, £700,000 was made available to support the implementation of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. From this, a Digital Democracy Fund of £500,000 was developed to support the digital transformation of local democracy.

A total of 52 bids amounting to £1,062,622.74 were received from 21 Local Authorities.

I have approved funding for a number of bids including:

* Upgrading and refurbishment of council chambers and meeting rooms.
* Equipment to enable hybrid meetings to take place for councillors to be more efficient whilst working virtually, the implementation of accessibility software and additional licenses to support video conferencing.
* Research into how 16 – 25 year-olds would like to be included in the democratic process; purchase of hardware for councillors to be more efficient whilst working virtually and the implementation of accessibility software.
* Development of an app to facilitate multi-location voting in meetings.
* Development of a digital space where councils and the public are able to exchange ideas.
* Collaborations for communication and training projects to be taken forward