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“I was able to take part in the chamber as if I was there” – women local councillors, remote meeting attendance, and Covid-19: a positive from the pandemic?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores research findings regarding the possibilities offered by remote attendance at council meetings as implemented during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, and reflects upon how this may improve women local councillors' experiences, as well as women's political participation and the accessibility of Welsh local government going forward. Influenced by feminist institutionalist theory, this paper examines how councils' formal organisational norms and practices pre-pandemic privileged presenteeism, and explores participants' perceptions and experiences of the accessibility of local councils, especially for younger women with families and/or in other forms of employment. Presenting data from 19 semi-structured interviews with women local councillors in Wales (UK), both in-person and subsequently online during the pandemic, the paper discusses how remote attendance in local council meetings was considered an enabling shift in formal organisational practices, especially for rural councils. Despite some dissenting opinions and voiced dubiousness (mostly concerning future hybrid implementation), through easing the time costs of being a local councillor, particularly for women balancing a gendered 'triple duty' of the political, personal, and professional, remote meeting attendance is an organisational solution, albeit somewhat forced in implementation, which presents clear means of improving women's political participation and representation in local government.

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Introduction

Feminist institutionalist research has found that political arenas and institutions are highly gendered workplaces with gendered 'rules of the game' (Lowndes, 2020) maintaining and privileging masculine political cultures and ways of 'doing politics' (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019, 2020). Through examining the informal and formal norms, cultures, contexts and practices of our political institutions, feminist institutionalist scholars have presented much evidence to support the assertion that political workplaces remain organised in such a way that can form structural barriers to women's political participation (Erikson & Josefsson, 2020; Lowndes, 2014, 2020). This paper furthers this field through applying

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a feminist institutionalist lens to the previously under-researched political arena of Welsh local government, exploring whether the evidence of gendered organisational and structural barriers found in other political arenas is similarly found at the local level. The unique organisational contexts of local government are found here to compound and intersect with enduring gendered 'rules of the game' to prevent women's full participation in council chambers and restrict their political representation. Through discussing just one structural barrier and its possible solution – inaccessible meetings and the remote attendance solutions seen throughout the Covid-19 pandemic – this paper highlights how one simple shift in organisational practice could enable women elected representatives to participate in a fuller capacity in Welsh local government.

In March 2020, to attempt to 'flatten the curve' of infections and deaths due to Covid-19, education, work, and other events that did not necessitate being in-person in the United Kingdom began to take place remotely through virtual meeting software. The shift to remote working had a profound impact on work and society, and as this special edition highlights, the consequences of the pandemic have been significantly gendered. Throughout the pandemic, women were more likely to be responsible for home-schooling alongside homeworking, and were still primarily responsible for other domestic and caring tasks (Chung et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021; Xue & McMunn, 2020). Other papers in this special issue discuss these other gender inequality aspects, but this paper focuses on the impact of the shift to remote meeting attendance on women local councillors in Wales.

The forthcoming wider doctoral research through which the interview data presented here were collected considers women's political representation, experiences, and participation in Welsh local councils more generally. For this paper, however, there is a specific focus on whether councils' implementation of remote meeting attendance during Covid-19 presented an opportunity for the re-gendering of local government institutions, and whether this could improve women's experiences and political participation. The core research questions were as follows: (1) What were women's experiences and the perceived impact of the shift to remote meeting attendance during Covid-19 for women local councillors? (2) Does this present an opportunity for the re-gendering or feminisation of local government institutions to improve women's political participation in Welsh local government?

The structure of this paper is as follows. The next section explains the context behind the shift to remote meetings, before considering the extant literature and evidence around the gendered difficulties of balancing political duties with other personal and professional aspects of life – a phenomenon denoted here as the 'triple duty'. Feminist institutionalism is discussed with reference to how the interaction of formal organisational practices and informal cultures and norms affects women's political representation and full participation. Following this, the methodological approach and research design are outlined, with detail regarding the shift from in-person to online interviewing, and the impact of this on the interview process as well as the content of data itself. Findings pertaining to the additional gendered burdens facing women local councillors are then presented, as well as data regarding how pre-Covid organisational practices around meeting times reinforced gendered barriers. The paper explores remote attendance as an enabling provision through considering interviewees' experiences and the possibilities it presents. The paper then concludes with an outline of the theoretical contributions

made in this paper to exemplify how organisational shifts can change practice to make local political office more accessible and, ultimately, improve women's political representation.

Literature and context

First, to contextualise this paper, Welsh local councils, as with many other workplaces and political institutions, began to 'meet virtually' from March 2020 onwards, with Council meetings, Cabinet meetings, and regular committees conducted via software like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype for Business. Councils adopted remote meeting attendance at varying rates with some implementing virtual meetings relatively quickly (within weeks) whilst others trialled smaller, committee-based meetings before attempting larger, 'Full Council' meetings with all members later. The demographic of local councillors in Wales is skewed towards older and retired populations meaning there was some unfamiliarity with computer technology, and councillors required training on virtual meeting programmes. Moreover, whilst national and devolved political institutions including Senedd Cymru adopted a 'hybrid' approach to meeting (with some elected members present and others attending via video links) as the lockdowns eased over the course of the pandemic, local councils in Wales had not returned to physical or hybrid meeting spaces by the final research interview conducted in September 2020.¹

Wales' *Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act (2021)* was subsequently updated prior to the 2021 Senedd elections to require local authorities in Wales to enable remote attendance where necessary going forward. Wales, therefore, has now enshrined in law the right of councillors to attend meetings by means other than physical presence. This is the latest in attempts to revitalise Welsh democracy and encourage more representational diversity. Other examples include Wales' electoral enfranchisement of 16-year-olds, and the recommendations of various reports on diversity in local government (Equalities Local Government and Communities Committee, 2019; Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government, 2014; WLGA, 2018). Welsh local authorities can therefore now hold meetings 'by means of any equipment or other facility' as long as councillors can 'speak to and be heard by each other' or, if a meeting broadcasted to the public, can 'see and be seen by each other' (Welsh Government, 2021). As is discussed here, Wales' commitment to remote attendance presents an interesting organisational shift, which could make local government more accessible for current and prospective elected members and, subsequently, achieve the 'diversity in democracy' that Welsh Government has placed firmly on its agenda.

Wales has been regarded as a nation characterised by gender equality and women's activism,² and, post-devolution, recognised as a world leader for women's political representation. Many were optimistic about the positive impact of devolution on gender and other equality issues, with a commitment to equality of opportunity enshrined in the Government of Wales Act 1998. When Wales became the first nation globally to achieve a 50:50 balance in a national legislature in 2003, it was hoped this success would 'cascade down' or move across to other levels of representation (McAllister, 2020). However, not only has this contagion effect not come to fruition, Senedd Cymru, whilst remaining above 40 per cent, has never again reached gender parity. Furthermore, gender equality norms within the devolved legislature are slowly being eroded – political parties are

moving away from positive action, and family-friendly working practices suffering at the hands of a Senedd arguably operating over-capacity (Expert Panel on Assembly Expert Reform, 2017). Wales, it is claimed, has indeed failed to achieve the 'depth, breadth, and permanency' (Chaney, 2016, p. 234) of gender equality that academics had anticipated (Chaney et al., 2007; Mackay & Bilton, 2000; McAllister, 2020).

Women's descriptive representation in local government in Wales is particularly poor. Wales is divided into 22 local authorities each with either a 'City' or 'County Borough' Council to which members are elected every four or five years. Councils vary in size, with the smallest local councils consisting of 30 members, to the largest with 75 councillors. Following the most recent 2017 Welsh local elections, 352 of the elected 1250 councillors were women – a figure which constituted only 28 per cent. This came following reports that less than a third of local electoral candidates were women. To date, no council has achieved parity and women's descriptive representation across Wales' 22 councils ranges from 10 to 43 per cent. Moreover, the 'average' Welsh councillor is decidedly 'male, pale and stale' – 61 per cent of Welsh councillors were men over the age of 50 (Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government, 2014). Whilst the dearth of women electoral candidates suggests issues with the 'supply chain' and with 'getting women in', there are, as shown elsewhere, further problems with retaining women once they are elected, implying that local government in Wales is not as welcoming or women/family-friendly as it could be (Allen, 2012a, 2012b; Allen et al., 2016).

This research used a feminist institutionalist approach to assess whether Welsh local government is organised, constructed, and maintained in a manner that prevents the full political representation and participation of women. Feminist institutionalism contends that the organisational practices of institutions or, to use Kenny's (2014) term, their 'formal architecture', intersect with 'informal' cultures to create a political environment heavily constructed around masculine hegemonic norms to maintain the 'male, pale, and stale' (Kenny & Mackay, 2012) status quo and exclude women or other minority groups. Formal organisational practices or 'rules in use' (Lowndes, 2014, 2020) may themselves be written or unwritten and together with informal masculine cultures create 'gendered conditions in politics' (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019) and gendered workplaces.

Women 'falling off the ladder' has often been attributed to difficulties in reconciling competing identities and responsibilities (Allen, 2012a). Research shows us that there is a continued gendered division of household domestic labour and caring responsibilities. Mannay (2014, pp. 65–87) contends that the domestic sphere in contemporary Wales 'remains a site of inequality', with women still performing the majority of the 'second shift' and that Welsh women today face 'negotiating the impossibility of being both in full-time employment and meeting the ideology of the "Welsh Mam"'. Continuing gendered social norms and divisions of domestic and caring labour therefore mean that women politicians can face a 'double duty' of balancing the personal and the political, with researching finding that women often make difficult choices including delaying running for elected office until their children are older (Campbell & Childs, 2014; Maguire, 2018; Thomas, 2002).

This paper's focus on one specific organisational practice – the way council meetings are held – examines just one example of a gendered formal institutional norms to outline that it is the combination of multiple seemingly innocuous practices, which fetter women's political presence and representation. Previous research, for example, has

discussed the impact of ‘macho presenteeism’ in political institutions at the local level, finding that physical attendance at council meetings is expected, privileged, and scrutinised and is an exclusionary practice that is highly gendered (McNeil et al., 2017). As Charles (2014, p. 375) previous research into Welsh local government found, ‘working practices do not take into account domestic or caring responsibilities’, and the timings and physical nature of meetings form a particular barrier for women who are still perform most domestic and childcare responsibilities and work alongside. Formal practices and informal cultures thereby interact to form gendered barriers to political participation.

Organisational practices have a significant impact on whether women will choose to stand for re-election, affect women in office, and those considering whether to stand, clearly forming significant barriers to women’s political participation. Evidence elsewhere has suggested that technology could eradicate some accessibility issues through enabling remote attendance and voting (Awan-Scully et al., 2018; Childs, 2016; Expert Panel on Assembly Expert Reform, 2017). This research therefore contributes more evidence to this field and addresses the implementation and impact of remote attendance at the local level.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 19 women local councillors from four case-study councils across Wales.³ A multiple case-study design was operationalised as there are significant differences between Welsh councils in terms of descriptive representations of women (ranging from 10 to over 40 per cent), geographic characteristics, and political party make-up. A purposive sample was used and four councils representing typical and atypical cases were chosen. Details for each council are shown in Table 1 – concerns around anonymity mean that details provided for councils remain purposefully vague here and identifiable information is omitted when presenting interviewee data.

Interviewees were then sampled based on their political party affiliation, their position within their council, their length of service, and whether they had previously championed policies for women.⁴ Nineteen interviews were conducted between September 2019 and September 2020. Eleven took place in-person pre-pandemic, and eight via online methods following Welsh lockdowns halting in-person fieldwork during the pandemic. Online interviews are often derided for failing to achieve the nuance of in-person research, with limited opportunity for interpretation of body language, camera issues or pixilation, and requests to repeat sentences due to poor bandwidth (Illingworth, 2001; You, 2021). For this research, however, this methodological shift enriched data through enabling analysis

Table 1. Details of chosen case-study Councils A–D.

	Descriptive Representation of Women	Party Control	Council demographic features ¹⁶
Council A	30–35 per cent	Labour (majority)	South Wales/City Council (Urban)
Council B	30–35 per cent	Labour (minority-led)	South Wales/County Borough Council (Urban)
Council C	Over 35 per cent	Labour (majority)	South Wales/County Borough Council (Urban)
Council D	Less than 15 per cent	Plaid Cymru & Independent Coalition	West Wales (Rural Council)

of the different perceptions and experiences of those interviewed pre-pandemic, who spoke hypothetically about remote attendance as a possible enabling practice, and those who could reflect on its successes or drawbacks following lived experience of virtual council meetings during the pandemic.

Online interviews were carried out via digital platforms such as Zoom, Teams and Skype for Business. All interviews were recorded and researcher-transcribed to ensure closeness and familiarity with the data. Interview data was then thematically analysed to prioritise the centring of women's voices and stories and identify key patterns and themes.

Results and discussion

The supposedly part-time and 'local' nature of being a local councillor means that local government is often considered more accessible than more 'demanding' elected positions in Westminster or Senedd Cymru, which can require extended periods away from home. As such it has been considered a 'training ground' for prospective career politicians (Newton & van Deth, 2009), and praised for being more easily combined with competing responsibilities such as caring for children or other relatives. However, unlike being an MP⁵ or MS,⁶ being a local councillor, particularly on the backbenches, is a role that many councillors must combine with other work given the paucity of remuneration.⁷ A third burden – the professional – is therefore unique to local government and leaves women local councillors with the often-insurmountable task of balancing the political with the personal and professional – referred to here as a 'triple duty'. Whilst this is clearly an issue for all councillors, regardless of gender, it is the interaction of the 'rules with gendered effects' (Lowndes, 2020) within Welsh councils with continued gendered social division of domestic labour and caring responsibilities (Mannay, 2014; Warren, 2011) which creates an environment in Welsh local government which is not family-, nor women-, friendly.

It should be noted here that none of the interviewees, or women in the wider pool of possible interviewees, had young children at the time of interview. Two interviewees had experienced having children whilst being a councillor – Marie (Council B) had teenaged children at time of interview, and Lara (pilot interviewee) reflected upon becoming a mother whilst she was a councillor in her previous elected term in the 1990s. The rest of the women interviewed had not had dependent children whilst being in their elected role. Other interviewees mentioned having other caring responsibilities, however, for partners and elderly parents whilst being councillors. Recruiting women with such caring responsibilities had been an aim of the purposive sample and this underrepresentation amongst interviewees alone suggests that such women, and particularly mothers of young children, face barriers to their political participation and, as a result, are under-represented in Welsh local government.

Despite the lack of mothers in the study sample, the struggle of being an elected woman local councillor with 'the kids, the shopping, the cooking, the ironing' (Jacqueline, retired councillor, Council A) was perceived, even by those not then balancing their councillor role with dependent children, as a significant barrier to current and prospective women councillors' political participation. This perception was shared by all interviewees – Gwen (Council A) stated, for example, that she 'wouldn't have gone on to be a councillor with a young family'. Similarly, Samantha (Council D) explained that the women she had

tried to encourage to run for elected local office were 'working full-time and they've got home or children or possibly caring responsibilities with their own parents [and] just feel it's too much'. As Rose (Council A) aptly summarised:

It would be extremely difficult, because the structure, the systems and the processes do not enable that access for women who've got dependent children.

There was a consensus amongst interviewees that the institutional norms and practices, or 'structures' and 'systems', of local government discouraged women from standing for election and, for those in elected positions, fettered their full participation in the Chamber. Firstly, informal norms regarding expected time commitment for an elected role in Welsh local government were perceived as exacerbating the task of balancing politics with any other responsibilities. There was a common view amongst interviewees that being a councillor was '24/7, 52 weeks a year' (Alys, Council C) and involved a dedication of time above and beyond the 21 hours denoted as expected in formal guidance (IRPW, 2019). Indeed, in the latest *Exit Survey of Members Standing Down* (WLGA, 2017), most councillors reported spending between 21 and 30 hours per week on their roles, and 15 per cent spent more than 41 hours. Being a 'good' councillor who was visible in the community, 'value for money' (Jacqueline) and worthy of re-election, necessitated significant time sacrifice and, crucially, time outside of 'normal' working hours.

Thrasher et al. (2015) found that women councillors were more likely to be proactive in their role on a weekly basis and were more frequently contacted by constituents, spending a reported three more hours per week on their elected role than men. Interviewees in this study also reported spending time being active in their community, meeting with constituents, and attending events which was often the most enjoyed aspect of being a councillor. This was somewhat expected as all interviewees became councillors to extend prior community involvement and activism into a formal political space. No woman interviewed was motivated by aspirations for a political career, though some had since progressed to senior positions within their council, and one to a position in national politics.

Marie (Council B) who, at time of interview, was a backbench councillor with no additional responsibilities, explained:

You cannot have a normal nine to five, evenings off, family environment with weekends off [...] it's an awful lot of evenings, so a lot of events.

The time commitment required had led to the breakdown of Marie's marriage six months into her elected term because of the 'change in the dynamics of the family', an extreme example of how the required time commitments exacerbate the tensions between political and personal responsibilities. This echoes previous research – Awan-Scully et al. (2018), for example, similarly found that AMs⁸ felt that they were 'never off duty' and that the impact of political office on family life was 'a concern [for women] when standing as a candidate and when fulfilling the role of an AM'.

All interviewees perceived their council's pre-Covid organisational practices regarding meeting times and their long-standing traditions of physical presenteeism as doing little to ease the time burdens of women, and particularly those with caring and other responsibilities. Local councils in the United Kingdom are infamous for their 'evening meetings and late finishes' (McNeil et al., 2017). Such timings were traditionally adopted

Table 2. Timings of core meetings for Councils A–D.

Council	Full Council Meeting	Cabinet Meeting	Regular Committee Meetings
A	Tuesdays – 5 pm	Wednesdays – 4 pm	Planning: 10 am Wednesday Performance: 4 pm Mondays and 10 am Tuesdays Licencing: 10 am Monday
B	Wednesdays – 3 pm	Tuesdays – 2.30 pm	Overview and Scrutiny: 2 pm various days Audit: 2 pm various days Licencing: 10 am various days
C	Wednesdays – 5 pm	Tuesdays – 10.30 am OR 1.30 pm OR 2.30 pm	Mostly at 10 am or 5 pm
D	All meetings take place at 10 am		

as they were outside the working hours of men, and whilst some have been modernised, meetings continue to be held at times which are inaccessible for councillors who work and/or have young children. Table 2 below shows the times and days of the key meetings for each case study council.

A particularly apt example of inaccessible meeting times was Council B's 'Full Council' meeting⁹ which, as per Table 2, took place on Wednesdays at three o'clock. Full Council meetings can last anywhere between one and four hours so this arrangement was unsuitable for any woman who had school-aged children who would 'have to arrange for somebody to pick up and drop [children] off' (Marie). Similarly, with Councils A and C's Full Council meetings at 5pm, which also often run until late,¹⁰ women with children were forced to seek childcare, with 'the kids bouncing from school to a childminder's and [meetings not ending] until 8 o'clock at night' (Gwen).

Similar to the House of Commons provisions of childcare vouchers for MPs (Childs, 2016), there is some legislation in place which attempts to mitigate the financial costs of family-unfriendly meetings, insofar as councillors can claim for remuneration of caring expenses. Such measures have long been in place in Welsh local government but have not remained free from criticism. Awan-Scully et al.'s (2018) study of barriers and incentives to standing for election to the National Assembly for Wales (now Senedd Cymru) found that participants argued being a local councillor was preferable because of expenses arrangements. Unfortunately, until recently councils were required to publish councillors' childcare expenses claims. The Independent Remunerational Panel for Wales (IRPW) updated guidance to councils in 2021, allowing councils to publish only the total expenses claimed for care, rather than those of individual councillors, but there remains concern for this author that councillors with children, because they are underrepresented, are likely to remain identifiable.

Interviewees here stated that the publication and scrutinisation of politicians' expenses, or 'brown envelopes' to use Marie's term, by the public, opposition parties, and the media, discouraged councillors from claiming. Indeed, between 2016 and 2019, claims of the care expenses allowance were extremely low across the four case study councils with a singular claim totalling £45.00 whilst claims for travel expenses totalled £115,330.00. This, along with evidence at other levels of politics such as Childs (2016, p. 20) *The Good Parliament* report, suggests that 'legitimate children related costs [are] perceived as "expensive" in the media, by political opponents, and amongst the public' and there is stigma attached to claims for caring expenses. Whilst remuneration for

caring expenses may seem a positive move towards accessibility and reduction in financial cost for councillors, therefore, the seemingly neutral institutional rules and practices regarding reporting of expenses and claims have had a significant gendered effect (Lowndes, 2014).

Changing meeting times to suit those with children may be presented as a solution, however, in local government councillors', particularly for younger members', professional working commitments must also be considered. The low rates of remuneration and lack of entitlement to a retirement pension, means younger, backbench councillors usually carry out their political role alongside professional employment for financial security. Previous research (see Briggs, 2000; Linsley et al., 2006; McNeil et al., 2017) has highlighted that women 'are more likely than men to be deterred by time pressures [...] attributed to the demands of combining council work alongside caring roles, as well as employment' (Maguire, 2018, p. 33). Indeed, Lara who reflected on having young children whilst she was first a councillor in the late 1990s, stated that she had found that her councillor role 'combined very well with having children', but only because she 'had to give up work',¹¹ and that, 'as more women go back to work after having had their families, [it was] harder getting young women on the council'.

Most councils distribute surveys to members asking for preferred meeting times. However, as Theresa (Council B) explained, times remained organised around 'people who don't have jobs [who] like to meet at half past nine in the morning [because] they've got one vote, [and] I've got one vote'. The over-representation of older, retired councillors and those without caring responsibilities means meetings are arranged around their lighter schedules and not the needs of younger councillors with children or jobs. In this study, younger, back-bench councillors who were combining their elected role with working commitments struggled to maintain balance the political and the professional. Carrying out their elected role necessitated substantial support from employers to ensure even basic councillor duties (such as meeting attendance) could be performed, especially as meeting times often clashed with working hours:

Because I have a job like sometimes, you know, sometimes I'm in work and I can't get out of that or, you know, get back to [BOROUGH] because I work quite far away. (Theresa, Council B)

If consider Table 2 once more, to attend Council B's full council meeting at 3pm on a Wednesday, a councillor would require at least 2.5 hours off work. This assumes that she works a typical 9–5 job and has a thirty-minute journey to the council chamber.¹² Consequently, whilst councillors are entitled to time off work for civic duties, as per the Employment Rights Act 1996, travel to and from council buildings for in-person meetings means that councillors may have to request a full afternoon off to carry out basic council duties. This was particularly an issue for councillors in Council D, a rural council where travelling to the council buildings can take an hour from the other end of the county.

Women already experience a motherhood penalty,¹³ and usually take more time off work for caring for children and other caring responsibilities, so taking this time can jeopardise women's professional careers (AIG, 2019). Women councillors may therefore resist asking for time off for civic duties, something Ffion (Council A) had done this when she was working alongside her councillor role: 'I was allowed some leave of absence [...] think it was 18 days a year or 36 half-days. Um so I really would spread that out'. Other

employers had expressed their disapproval about allowing time off for civic duties. For example, Tara (Council B), explained that juggling her political role and professional working commitments was

‘quite challenging because [her] employers weren’t supportive, they didn’t see the value of [her being a councillor], and they didn’t really encourage [her] to attend meetings’.

Interviewees’ discussions also reflected feminist institutionalist arguments whereby exclusionary formal organisational practices are often legitimised by informal norms and attitudes (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019). Marie explained that in-person meeting attendance was highly politicised and ‘scrutinised’ by one’s political opposition and was used as ‘political ammunition’ against councillors, even if they had ‘very good reasons’ for missing a meeting. She perceived this as a clearly gendered informal culture which excluded ‘lone-parent, female councillors with no support network’ and one where women were shown ‘no mercy’. This culture of macho presenteeism, also found by previous research in Welsh local government (Farrell & Titcombe, 2016), was perceived as penalising women politically, making them targets for political ridicule in the Chamber.

Evidently, there may not be one meeting time to suit all councillors: meetings during school hours (10–2pm, for example) would exclude councillors who work, and afternoon and evening meetings exclude those with families. Attention then turns to the locus of this paper: remote attendance as an organisational solution to the aforementioned issues and how re-gendering just one ‘rule-in-use’ could improve accessibility of councils, making them family- and women- friendly. The above discussion has shown that formal organisational practices – in this case, meeting times – were usually legitimised and supported by the problematic culture of macho presenteeism within Welsh local councils. This privileging of physical attendance has meant that councils have, thus far, mostly resisted the adoption of technological solutions to increase accessibility, yet this was considered a clear and obvious solution by those interviewed pre-Covid.

Technological solutions and modernisation have been recommended at other levels of politics as means to improve accessibility even before the Covid pandemic (Awan-Scully et al., 2018). Childs’ (2016, p. 38) report into the accessibility of the House of Commons, for example, recommended that MPs should be able to vote remotely whilst on periods of leave, and that Parliament address the ‘question of technology’ by considering virtual conferencing – ‘a widespread practice beyond Parliament’. Those interviewed before the Covid pandemic in this study called for remote attendance and more technological flexibility which they felt could enable access when councillors could not be physically present:

We desperately needed to sort out remote attendance at meetings [...] I could be sitting in my office in London and engaging in a meeting here. (Ffion)

In the 21st century, we can engage with each other in other ways than having to have face-to-face meetings [...] boards of multinational companies are not physically all getting together in one place, they’re using Skype. (Rose)

As Rose explained, Welsh local government was perceived as trailing professional sectors insofar as councils had not made any tangible progress to adopting technological solutions to meeting attendance until 2020. The pandemic therefore modernised and digitally updated the way council meetings took place, whether through meeting wholly on digital

platforms, or through enabling ‘hybrid’ remote attendance with some councillors ‘skyping in’ whilst others were physically present. This has been seen elsewhere with Mencarelli (2021, p. 2) discussing how ‘the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic represented a valuable window of opportunity’ for change in political institutions which have otherwise ‘lagged behind in the name of procedural traditionalism’. Here, again, we see that influence of informal traditions and normative cultures on reluctance towards digital updating has been found at other levels of politics.

Implementation of remote meeting attendance for Welsh local councils during the pandemic was not entirely without issue. The older demographic of local councillors delayed the shift to remote attendance and meant training on virtual platforms was needed. Interviewees spoke of ‘dry-runs’ and unfamiliarity with technology:

We’re going to give it a dry-run [...] we’ll see how that goes and hopefully we can extend then and start. (Samantha, Council D)

It’s just a matter of getting used to this new technology and being brave enough to use it. (Nia, Council D)

The digital shift, therefore, necessitated appropriate infrastructure, training, and the willingness of councillors to embrace technology which was previously unfamiliar. Most interviewees who had experienced the shift were positive and supported the organisational shift. They attested that remote attendance increased accessibility through reduced travel which would help those with the competing responsibilities discussed throughout this paper and may have other, environmental benefits¹⁴:

I think [remote attendance] could really advantage women and parents. [...] It would allow though those that can’t get in, who have got childcare issues, to engage. (Marie)

[Remote attendance] would be a positive. And it could mean that you could get more younger people being councillors [...] it could make a world of difference. (Nia)

We’re talking about reducing our carbon footprint. [...] I’m one of the furthest from the [council chamber] [...] It’s quite a trip. And I think [online meetings] work well. (Angharad, Council D)

It’s less travelling so helps the environment, and helps people’s time, their work-life balance as well. You know, they’re not stuck in traffic on the [A-road]. (Alys, Council C)

I think a lot more could be done via remote meetings because we’ve got to think of the pollution. I’m a committed environmentalist, [...] to avoid cars trundling up and down. [...] And you’ve got to account for people who work, for children and things like that. (Mali, Council B)

Remote meetings, therefore, were considered an organisational shift which had improved the experiences of councillors who were negatively affected by previous physical presenteeism of in-person meetings, and councillors interviewed during the pandemic were hopeful that the lifting of lockdowns would mean ‘a different way of working’ and did not want a return to ‘the old norm’ (Alys). Angharad also raised another important positive of remote attendance insofar as it aided liaising with members from other councils. She pointed out that these meetings would previously take place in Cardiff (Wales’ capital city) which, for her, would ‘take five hours to get there and back’ and that now there was ‘no excuse not doing it this [digital] way’.

Remote meetings were seen as a relatively simple change which could encourage working women and, crucially, mothers to stand to become councillors. Angharad and Samantha both mentioned the difficulties they faced when recruiting women to stand in Council D. Its nature as a rural council meant lengthy travelling which excluded those with family and working responsibilities – Angharad had, for example, tried to recruit a woman who ‘gave up last time’ because of ‘work and family pressures’, and suspected she would wait until ‘her kids have grown up’. The digital shift meant that she and Samantha were newly hopeful that ‘it might make it a bit easier for people’ (Samantha) and that ‘if in future we can do more virtual meetings, it might bring in more women who might have found it difficult to travel’ (Angharad).

There remained some dissenting voices, however. Four interviewees were unconvinced by remote meeting attendance. Ceri, who was interviewed pre-pandemic and thus speaking hypothetically, stated ‘I don’t see remote attendance ever working’ and joked that she did not want to be ‘sitting there in curlers and a dressing gown’. Given that Ceri had not yet experienced the shift to remote attendance at time of interview, we cannot speculate as to her thoughts on the organisational shift since Covid. Nonetheless, Council C has since moved to a hybrid way of meeting as of autumn 2021 and Ceri has been reported on the council’s website as praising the new technology and the increased accessibility of this approach.¹⁵ This suggests that her doubts about remote attendance may have been somewhat allayed by experiences and implementation of the shift during the pandemic.

Hesitancy and doubt amongst those interviewed *during* the pandemic was mostly attributed to concerns about the future implementation of a hybrid approach, with some members physically present and others attending remotely. Tara had attended a hybrid meeting and found that others could not see her ‘because they were focusing on the screen’. Conversely, Samantha who was supportive of remote meeting attendance had also experienced a ‘hybrid’ model before the initial lockdown in Wales thought this ‘worked surprisingly well’, with issues of the Chair being unable to see her solved by other members or officers ‘bringing her in’. As a councillor in a senior position, however, it is likely that a concerted effort was made to ensure Samantha was heard and brought into debate and, thus, it may be that other members would struggle to be heard. This would clearly contravene the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2021) which states that members ‘must be able to see and hear each other’.

Marie, whilst generally positive about remote attendance as improving accessibility as seen above, also had similar concerns about hybridity and ‘not being able to see everybody [especially] when you’re dealing with very difficult subjects’. This is a common concern around virtual meeting platforms insofar as evidence has shown that they can create a ‘disembodied experience’, removing the nuances of body language, facial expressions, and gestures (Illingworth, 2001; You, 2021). Indeed, the author’s own reflections on conducting digital interviews highlighted these issues – it was harder to read research participants’ body language and facial expressions in an online setting due to pixelation or poor bandwidth preventing the turning on of cameras. It should be noted here that online interviews took place in the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic when remote meeting attendance was relatively novel. Implementation of remote meetings, as well as the hybrid approach about which Tara was apprehensive, may have since been trialled and improved.

The most vociferous dissident regarding remote meeting attendance was Jacqueline, an opposition councillor in Council A. She stated that she hoped the pandemic would not mean a shift to remote meetings because ‘having a meeting where you’re face to face with everybody, you’ve got a much better chance of everybody having their say’. Jacqueline, throughout her interview, had been clear that being a woman councillor member of the opposition was ‘very, very hard’ and ‘very frustrating’ and was clear that opposition voices often do not get heard, something she thought was exacerbated by virtual formats. She raised questions about how remote meeting technology could be best employed to ensure that council chambers remain as transparent and accountable as possible, with appropriate levels of scrutiny and participation. These sentiments echo those of Jacob Rees-Mogg MP (as cited in Meakin, 2021) who argued against a hybrid model in the House of Commons, stating that ‘much of the business under the hybrid proceedings was deliberately arranged to be non-contentious’, and that interventions were hard to achieve using remote participation. Such concerns have been termed, by Mencarelli (2021, p. 7), as a ‘relational cost’ whereby digital updates have led to ‘the loss of spontaneity in parliamentary behaviour [...] preventing those moments of informal interaction between MPs’.

These councillors were also concerned about how a shift to remote meeting attendance had removed other ‘informal’, peripheral aspects of politics outside of formal council meetings. Tara explored this from her standpoint as a councillor who had been elected part-way through a term in a by-election. The opportunity to ask questions or have quiet conversations with those around her as a new councillor had prevented feelings of isolation and made her ‘a bit more comfortable, more confident’. She worried that the digital shift could be isolating in some ways. Marie similarly worried that remote meetings ‘could be more isolating than inclusive’ for councillors. Jacqueline was also concerned about the politics that is done in the members’ room or over ‘a cup of tea or coffee’ where ‘you can perhaps be a little more forthright’ and not as ‘restrained and polite [as] in the chamber’. As aforementioned however, these interviewees had only experienced ‘emergency’ digital measures at time of interview. Improvements with remote meeting technologies as employed in a hybrid manner post-pandemic may therefore address these participants’ concerns as members would attend virtually only when circumstances prevented physical attendance.

Conclusion

Experiences of remote meeting attendance were therefore mixed, and some concerns were voiced about the relational cost of virtual meetings, as well as technical hiccups. Those who had experienced the shift positively echoed the hopes of those interviewed pre-pandemic who believed that remote meetings would modernise council practices, finding that in practice it reduced travel commitments and allowed for a better work–life balance. Women councillors were optimistic about the possibilities of remote attendance for increasing accessibility, especially for those with other commitments, and identified it as a key organisational shift for improving women’s political participation. Remote attendance was perceived to be an enabling organisational practice for councillors who must travel long distances, those who work, for those with caring responsibilities and, though not discussed in depth here, those with disabilities or other access requirements

would likely also benefit. There were some negative experiences, with two councillors describing remote meetings as 'more isolating than inclusive', and others sharing worries about whether wholly virtual meetings may negatively impact political accountability and scrutiny. It is worth noting that the women interviewed during the Covid pandemic were spoken to within the first few months of the 2020 'lockdowns' and, therefore, these comments may reflect experiences when remote attendance, technological solutions, and certainly hybridity were in their infancy. Notwithstanding this, these concerns have been echoed elsewhere (Meakin, 2021; Mencarelli, 2021), and remain relevant for future considerations regarding implementing remote attendance in Welsh local government.

Previous research has concluded that 'it is difficult to reform an institution once it is created' (Mackay & Waylen, 2014, p. 490), attesting that enshrining gender equality cultures and practices, as well as family-friendly working conditions, is more easily achieved in the creation process of a new institution, than it is through changing long-standing informal norms and structures in a well-established political arena. Through these findings we can see that small organisational changes can take place in a piecemeal manner in older institutions through modernisation of policy and trialling of new methods, yet in the case of Welsh local government, these were not organically identified or implemented.

Remote meeting attendance had already been identified and recommended by those interested in improving the accessibility of other political arenas and hailed as a '21st Century' solution to the presenteeism and inaccessibility of political meetings (Awan-Scully et al., 2018; Childs, 2016; Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government, 2014; Study of Parliaments Group, 2021). Unfortunately, the use of technology has only been widely accepted in Welsh local government because of the unprecedented conditions of the global pandemic. Realistically, this organisational shift and the acceptance of remote meetings has only occurred because *all* council members faced barriers to in-person attendance during the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than just the 'usual' minority who always face these obstacles to political participation (e.g. women, disabled councillors, and councillors with competing professional and personal circumstances). This paper therefore contributes to theoretical understandings of organisational change to support women's participation in political office by exploring how barriers normally only encountered by current political minorities, namely the times of meetings and traditional presenteeism in local government, were promptly responded to in a time of general crisis through the re-gendering and re-engineering of one procedural norm. Relying on crises or exceptional circumstances which force the majority to experience such barriers as a means for re-gendering political organisations' practices cannot be considered a long-term solution. Moreover, it further remains to be seen whether councils will retain this commitment, acceptance, and engagement with technological solutions to remote meeting attendance. The author recommends, however, that all necessary measures are adopted to encourage a continued commitment to this procedural change.

Avenues for future research are apparent here – a follow-up study of whether councils have continued to engage with remote meeting attendance in hybrid formats since the pandemic, and the impact of this on women's experiences and ability to participate, is necessary. Moreover, it would be apt to explore the impact of any long-term enabling provisions on women's propensity to stand and whether these changes are well-advertised to prospective councillors. Will councils, political parties, or the Welsh Local

Government Association advertise remote attendance in their programmes to empower women and improve the diversity of elected members? And, if so, will more women stand for election in 2022, and subsequently, will councils follow through on any promises of commitments to increased accessibility through remote attendance? These questions remain unanswered at time of publication, but evidence presented here shows that it would be very remiss of local councils in Wales to return to the ‘traditional way of doing things’ that has indeed been ‘male, pale, and stale’.

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Notes

1. At this time, some areas in Wales had also re-entered a ‘local lockdown’ – the Welsh Government’s response to the second peak of coronavirus whereby local authority areas would enter lockdowns with residents discouraged from travelling locally and between boroughs.
2. For an apt and inspiring example, the author would encourage readers to consider the Welsh women’s group ‘Women for Life on Earth’ who marched against nuclear installations at RAF Greenham Common – see Liddington’s (1991) *The Road to Greenham Common*.
3. This research was approved by Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee under reference SREC/2775. Informed consent was sought and participants either physically or digitally signed consent forms.
4. This was ascertained through an Internet search for salient policies or schemes for women spearheaded by interviewees.
5. Member of Parliament (Westminster).
6. Senedd Member – an elected politician in Wales’ devolved parliament, Senedd Cymru.
7. Councillor remuneration in Wales is standardised. The basic rate was £13,868 at the time of data collection (2019–20) – this figure had not increased since 2010. In comparison, basic remuneration for Scottish councillors was £18,604 in 2020, an increase from £16,234 in 2010.
8. Assembly Member – term used for elected members of the National Assembly for Wales, now Senedd Cymru (MS or Member of the Senedd is now used).
9. These are meetings which all councillors in the Council, regardless of party or position, are expected to attend. They usually occur once a month.
10. The author attended a Full Council meeting in Council A and this continued until 8.30 pm.
11. Italics represents interviewee emphasis. Lara had to give up her job when she became a councillor as she had been working for the local council and it would have constituted a conflict of interest.
12. Given that many people in rural areas of Wales have to commute to larger towns and cities outside of their local area for work, this is a conservative estimate.
13. See, for example, the charity work of ‘Pregnant then Screwed’ and founder Joeli Brearley’s (2021) book *Pregnant Then Screwed: The Truth About the Motherhood Penalty and How to Fix It*.

14. This assertion has been supported by scientific research which found that global carbon emissions reduced, on average, by 17% in April 2020 relative to the 2019 mean emissions (Le Quére et al., 2020).
15. To uphold anonymity, the author cannot provide a reference to the council website.
16. 'Urban' here denotes councils which have more populations of 100,000 – Bands A and B as per the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRPW, 2019), and 'rural' those with a population below 100,000 or Band 'C'.

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