

REPORT TO ABERDEENSHIRE COUNCIL – 24 SEPTEMBER 2020

VIRTUAL COMMITTEE MEETINGS

1 Reason for Report / Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks confirmation from Full Council that virtual committee meetings will remain until a further review in January 2021.

2 Recommendations

The Council is recommended to:

- 2.1 **agree that all necessary Aberdeenshire Council Committees will continue on a remote basis with a further review at Full Council on 14 January 2021.**
- 2.2 **agree to the continued provision of electronic agenda packs only for all Council Committees with options for the provision of hard copies for members (if requested) to allow them to chair a meeting effectively OR for the purposes of addressing an equalities issue which necessitates additional support.**

3 Purpose and Decision Making Route

- 3.1 On 18 March 2020, Full Council agreed to adopt a new [Part 5 of the Scheme of Governance](#) entitled “Supplementary Addendum in response to Covid-19 Pandemic”. Part 5 provides that “there shall be a presumption in favour of holding remote Meetings by way of teleconference, video conference or otherwise.” These arrangements have been kept under review by officers.
- 3.2 On 13 July 2020, the Recovery Reference Group considered a report on an analysis of political decisions which had been made remotely during lockdown and possible options for future working. The Recovery Reference Group supported recommendations in the report in terms of remote working, remote meetings and the use of electronic agenda packs until the end of 2020, subject to further consultation with Chairs on their requirement for a paper copy of the agenda pack, and that these proposals would be included in a report to Full Council in September 2020.

4 Discussion

- 4.1 Officers across the Council have worked well together to swiftly facilitate committee meetings being held remotely by default during the COVID-19 pandemic. The commitment of elected members and officers to sustain the democratic decision making of the Council has been remarkable.

- 4.2 The Council's investment in technology in previous years has enabled a fairly smooth transition for both officers and elected members as they were already familiar with "Skype For Business" as a tool used for remote Council meetings and were equipped and prepared for digital working. We have provided additional remote ICT training sessions for our Elected Members.
- 4.3 Our Council has been recognised nationally as being at the cutting edge of continued democratic input during the pandemic and has been a source of "best practice" advice for other Councils and organisations such as COSLA. Carefully conceived remote meeting protocols were developed to ensure ongoing local democratic input and public participation. These protocols have been shared with other local authorities. There has been minimal impact on decision making processes at Aberdeenshire. By comparison, other Local Authorities have been unable technically to support remote participation either in part or in full and there has been a need for them to delegate significant decision making to officers or to cabinet arrangements. Being able to continue to facilitate remote meetings has resulted in relatively few occasions during the pandemic when Urgent Powers have been used by officers with the appropriate consultation with senior councillors. There has been no need to fall back on the Consolidated Business Committee agreed at Full Council on 18 March 2020.
- 4.4 Since the Council agreed the COVID-19 governance revisions on 18 March 2020 making remote participation our default mode of conducting business, the following have been held (statistics up to 31 August 2020):
- 4 Full Councils (attendance figures – up to 67 of elected members present),
 - 10 Audit/Policy Committees,
 - 34 Area Committees,
 - 2 Sustainability Committees,
 - 2 IJB/ 1 IJB Audit (with multiple external partners and participants),
 - 3 Local Review Body Meetings,
 - 2 Licensing Board Meetings and 4 Licensing Sub-Committee Meetings,
 - 8 School Placings and Exclusion Appeal Committee Meetings,
 - 2 Appeals Committee Meetings,
 - 2 Appointments Committee Meetings.

All have proceeded largely as usual on a Skype for Business Platform. The agendas of committees have been more limited due to the need to focus resources on the response to the pandemic and priority business only. We have continued to involve external partners and incorporate public participation through requests to speak in planning matters and some quasi-judicial hearings which other local authorities have not achieved.

Recording/livestreaming meetings

- 4.5 Since the Council agreed the COVID-19 governance revisions on 18 March 2020, initially all committees were recorded (with the exception of exempt or confidential items) and published online for public/press viewing following the

meeting. Prior to lockdown, webcasting of committees only occurred for Full Council, Audit and Policy Committees at Woodhill. Full Council agreed on 23 November 2017 that webcasting of council meetings should continue in Woodhill House Council Chamber and Committee Room 5 only and to the allocation of funding and identification of appropriate budget to meet the estimated costs. Having all Council committees made available to view online during lockdown has made them more accessible for members of the public. This has a positive impact on the protected characteristic of disability.

- 4.6 Some committees have been successfully live streamed since Full Council on 10 June 2020 with the support of the ICT service. Officers continue to explore the best option for live streaming and of recording meeting. Public participation such as requests to speak are facilitated by telephone and any presentations or additional materials are emailed in advance of the meeting. Officers continue to explore the best method for live streaming, recording meetings and public participation and are liaising with other local authorities.

Paperless committees

- 4.7 No paper committee reports or agenda packs have been provided to elected members for committee meetings during the lockdown period due to the inability to have staff in offices printing hard copies. As well as complying with national restrictions on the use of offices and travel, this has saved officer time and savings have also been made on printing and posting costs. It is estimated that over £7,000 has been saved on printing costs and over £3,000 has been saved on postage costs between March and August 2020. Additional training on virtual meetings and ICT equipment has been and can continue to be provided to elected members if required to assist them in assimilating to paperless committees. Although there are now limited numbers of support staff in offices to fulfil essential office-based work and therefore able to print papers, the Recovery Reference Group agreed on 13 July 2020 to recommend to Full Council that paperless committees would continue unless a Chair of a committee requested a paper copy in order to allow them to chair that meeting effectively or if an equalities issue necessitated additional support. A corporate decision has been made that Council staff should not be accessing council offices currently unless absolutely necessary. Special arrangements require to be put in place for council employees to accommodate any requests to print off paper copies.

Other benefits

- 4.8 One of the other benefits of virtual committees is that it gives the officers supporting the committees greater flexibility to cover any meeting from home easily. It also gives both officers and elected members more accessibility to committees in periods of bad weather.
- 4.9 In addition, savings have been made by members and officers in travel & subsistence during the pandemic. For example, members mileage claims and associated costs for March-August 2020 fell by 81% when compared to 2019.

It is estimated that over £3,000 in catering costs for committee meetings has been saved during this time.

Challenges

- 4.10 One of the challenges of virtual committees is that occasionally technical problems do occur preventing committee attendees from hearing or speaking. Colleagues in ICT have been incredibly helpful in their effort to resolve the minor technical difficulties which have occurred. Virtual committees have not yet been disrupted to such an extent with technical issues that we have had to abandon a committee. When minor technical issues have occurred the committee has been able to continue by, for example, the vice chair stepping in or officers and members dialling into a meeting from a telephone if they experience technical issues by broadband.
- 4.11 In light of the social distancing guidelines, it has not been possible to arrange site visits with Committee members where requested as part of the determination of a planning application. This has meant that two planning applications have been deferred to allow a site visit with Committee members. However, alternative sources of information are being explored and only where members cannot satisfy themselves that they have the necessary information to determine the application in the absence of a site visit, a deferral of the application will be considered. The feedback from one area committee was that planning presentations have improved and are being provided in advance, in particular the drone footage has been received positively and has added an extra dimension.
- 4.12 When we are unable to livestream committees whilst they are taking place, there is an impact on public transparency. Recording meetings and making these available after the event, however soon this is achieved, may not offer the strongest public confidence in governance arrangements. We strive to achieve livestreaming so that the public can watch in real time the discharge of local democracy as if they were able to walk into the meeting room. It has not always been possible to do this and this is a challenge when that happens and hence why we continue to make it a high priority to ensure livestreaming wherever possible.

Health & safety

- 4.13 At the time of writing this report, Scottish Government guidance remains that working from home remains the default position to reduce the risk of indoor transmission of COVID-19 in non-essential offices and on public transport. For the Health & Safety of staff, elected members, external partners, members of the public & press, it is suggested that throughout the period of Scottish Government phasing and beyond that political decision making by committees can continue to be done from home and there is no requirement for staff or elected members to be physically in an office for the remainder of 2020. This will also allow additional space for those who must attend an office for essential key work.

Options for Hybrid committees

- 4.14 It is not proposed that hybrid meetings take place with a combination of physical and virtual attendance as this would be more complex and difficult for officers and Chairs to manage. It is proposed that fully virtual meetings are more manageable than hybrid meetings.
- 4.15 If hybrid meetings are to take place there are many factors which require to be considered including:-
- It would not be possible to stagger arrival and departure times as all members (and most officers) at committees would require to be present for the entire committee. In terms of Standing Orders, there must be a defined time in terms of the notice to call a meeting.
 - Risk assessments would require to be carried out at the committee venues to manage the risks.
 - A review of layouts of committee meeting venues and common areas would be required. The layout of the Council Chamber in Woodhill for Full Council would be a challenge to implement social distancing measures.
 - Discussions may also require to be had with tenants in multi-tenant sites/buildings to ensure consistency across common areas
 - Consideration in relation to catering of committee meetings;
 - Whether PPE would be required, sourced, staff/members briefed & trained.
 - Transportation and uplift of equipment and cleaning of equipment & committee venue.
 - New procedures would also require to be created for managing hybrid meetings.
 - Additional staff may be required to facilitate hybrid meetings.
 - How would you choose who could attend physically and virtually?
 - If you allow members of the public access to a hybrid meeting in person difficult to know how many will attend.
 - Whether the current [Part 5 Supplementary Addendum](#) in response to the pandemic would require to be amended.
 - Whether to continue recording all committees and if so how these meetings would be recorded and made available to the public. Webcasting requires a physical presence by a Committee Officer in Woodhill in order to use the webcasting equipment.
 - Current government ["Test & Protect" guidance](#) provide that if one person present at a committee subsequently tests positive for COVID-19 then everyone present at the meeting and everyone in their household may have to self-isolate for 14 days thereafter if they are deemed to have been in "close contact".
 - Some area specific issues were raised during consultation in relation to hybrid meetings including that Marr Area Committee has no fixed meeting space and there would be a need to identify appropriate committee venue with stable/strong Wi-Fi connection; Both Formartine and Marr Area Committees had a lack of surface hubs and there would be a need to ensure satisfactory level of sound/visual for those participating remotely to ensure adequate level of participation.

Feedback from elected members

- 4.16 A survey was sent to all elected members on virtual committees. By 6 July 2020, 20 Councillors had responded. The high level feedback included the following information:-
- The majority (85%) were in favour of a continuation of virtual meetings;
 - 4.10 out of 5 average rating for the remote working tools available to members for virtual committees
 - The majority of members (70%) thought their digital skills had increased as a result of virtual meetings;
 - The majority of members (95%) felt supported effectively by officers in virtual committee meetings;
 - 4.55 out of 5 was the average rating for how easy members felt it was for them to contribute during a meeting;
 - Additional comments were received by some members with a mixed response as to whether they were in favour of a continuation of virtual meetings, preferred physical meetings or a hybrid.

Conclusions

- 4.17 Mixed responses have been received from elected members and some area committees regarding the best option for the future of virtual committee meetings. For the Health & safety of staff, elected members, external partners, members of the public & press, it is proposed that throughout the period of Scottish Government phasing and beyond that political decision making by committees can continue to be done from home and there is no requirement for officers or elected members to be physically in an office. It is proposed that political decision making continues to be done remotely for the remainder of 2020 with a review at Full Council on 14 January 2021. This report has highlighted many of the benefits of retaining virtual meetings including the reduction of time, travel and some costs.
- 4.18 It is not proposed that hybrid meetings take place with a combination of physical and virtual attendance as this would be more complex and difficult for officers and Chairs to manage. It is proposed that fully remote meetings are more manageable than hybrid meetings.
- 4.19 It is proposed that there is no return to paper documentation to Councillors for committee meetings. Should this be agreed and there is a need to return to hybrid or physical committees in some venues in due course there will be a requirement to consider power points and broadband available in committee venues.

5 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 5.1 This report helps deliver the Council Priorities in accordance with the Pillars “Our People” (principle Health & Wellbeing) and “Our Environment” as well as the key principle of right people, right places, right time; climate and sustainability.

5.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendations are agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial	X		
Staffing		X	
Equalities	X [EIA attached as Appendix 1]		
Fairer Scotland Duty		X	
Town Centre First		X	
Sustainability	X		
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing		X	

5.3 An equality impact assessment has been carried out as part of the development of the proposals set out above. It is included as Appendix 1 and there is a positive impact on those with the protected characteristic disability as all virtual committee meetings are accessible online which they previously were not when held in a physical location.

5.4 If virtual committees remain until the end of the year savings will be made to in relation to travel & subsistence costs as well as catering costs for committees. If electronic agenda packs are issued, savings will be made in relation to printing and postage costs. There are positive benefits of continuing with virtual committees until the end of the year in terms of sustainability. Reference is made to the Council's [Climate Change Declaration](#) which Council agreed on 18 March 2020. This declaration committed the Council to reduce emissions by 75% (against the 2010/11 baseline) by 2030 and become Net Zero by 2045.

5.5 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a [Corporate Level](#):

ACORP004 Business and organisational change

The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a [Strategic Level](#):

- *BSSR006 Digital Innovation*
- *ISSR004 Climate Change*

6 Scheme of Governance

6.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and had no comments to

make and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.

- 6.2 Full Council is able to consider and take a decision on this item in terms of A.2.3 of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as the matter relates to review of the Scheme of Governance.

Ritchie Johnson, Director of Business Services

Report prepared by Karen Wiles, Head of Legal & Governance
Date 31 August 2020

APPENDIX 1 - EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

EIA Version	Date	Author	Changes
1	31/8/20	L.Bremner	

Stage 1: Title and aims of the activity (“activity” is an umbrella term covering policies, procedures, guidance and decisions including those that affect services the council delivers).	
Service	Business Services
Section	Legal & Governance
Title of the activity etc.	Virtual Committee Meetings
Aims and desired outcomes of the activity	Continue virtual committee meetings and to issue electronic only agenda packs
Author(s) & Title(s)	Laura Bremner, Acting Legal Service Manager (Governance)

Stage 2: List the evidence that has been used in this assessment and explain what it means in relation to the activity you are assessing.		
Evidence	What does it say?	What does it mean?
Internal consultation with staff and other services affected.	Data has been gathered from members and officers in relation to the use of virtual committee meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of members and officers are in favour of a continuation of virtual committee meetings.	That there is support from members and officers for a continuation of virtual committee meetings.
External consultation (partner organisations, community groups, and councils.	Liaison with other local authorities as to how they are managing virtual committee meetings at this time. Feedback has been received from external agents attending virtual committee meetings.	That there is public support for a continuation of virtual committee meetings and we continue to liaise with other local authorities as to how they are managing virtual committees at this time.

Stage 3: Evidence Gaps.	
Are there any gaps in the information you currently hold?	No.

Stage 4: Measures to fill the evidence gaps.		
What measures will be taken to fill the information gaps before the activity is implemented? These should be included in the action plan at the back of this form.	Measures:	Timescale:

Stage 5: What steps can be taken to promote good relations between various groups/areas?	
These should be included in the action plan.	

Stage 6: How does the policy/activity create opportunities for advancing equality of opportunity?
<p>Since the Council agreed the COVID-19 governance revisions on 18 March 2020, initially all committees were recorded (with the exception of exempt or confidential items) and published online for public/press viewing following the meeting. Prior to lockdown, webcasting of committees only occurred for Full Council, Audit and Policy Committees at Woodhill. Full Council agreed on 23 November 2017 that webcasting of council meetings should continue in Woodhill House Council Chamber and Committee Room 5 only and to the allocation of funding and identification of appropriate budget to meet the estimated costs. Having all Council committees made available to view online during lockdown has made them more accessible for members of the public. This has a positive impact on the protected characteristic of disability.</p>

Stage 7a:
<p>Are there potential impacts on protected groups?</p> <p>The protected groups covered by the equality duty are: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.</p> <p>Who is affected by the activity or who is intended to benefit from the proposed activity and how? Complete the table below for each protected group by inserting "yes" in the applicable box/boxes below.</p>

	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Unknown
Age – Younger			X	
Age - Older			X	
Disability	X			
Race – (includes Gypsy Travellers)			X	
Religion or Belief			X	
Sex			X	
Pregnancy and maternity			X	
Sexual orientation – (includes Lesbian/ Gay/Bisexual)			X	
Gender reassignment – (includes Transgender)			X	
Marriage and Civil Partnership			X	

Stage 7b: Do you have evidence or reason to believe that this policy, activity etc. will or may impact on socio-economic inequalities?

This is about trying to be fair to everyone. Part of that is realising that not everyone may be starting at the same place. Some individuals and families may have low income, may have very little or no savings which means they are living from month to month therefore changes to council policies/services may have a greater adverse impact on them.

On this basis you should consider potential impacts on individuals/families by:

- Place: on specific vulnerable areas or communities (SIMD, regeneration, rural) e.g. housing, transport.
- Pockets: household resources, (Income, benefits, outgoings) ability to access a service
- Prospects: peoples life chances e.g.access to, or ability to access: employment, training, services (such as council or health) or support.

Groups of people who may be impacted include, but not limited to:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployed • Single parents and vulnerable families • People on benefits • Those involved in the criminal justice system • People in the most deprived communities • People who live in rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pensioners • Looked after children • Carers including young carers • Veterans • Students • Single adult households • People who have experienced the asylum system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those leaving the care setting including children and young people and those with illness • Homeless people • People with low literacy/numeracy • People with lower educational qualifications • People in low paid work • People with one or more protected characteristic
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Please complete by inserting “yes” in the applicable box/boxes below.

Socio-economic disadvantage	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Unknown
Pockets: Low income/income poverty – cannot afford to maintain regular payments such as bills, food, clothing				Yes

<p>Pockets: Low and/or no wealth – enough money to meet basic living costs and pay bills but have no savings to deal with any unexpected spends and no provision for the future</p>				<p>Yes</p>
<p>Pockets: Material deprivation – being unable to access basic goods and services i.e. financial products like life insurance, repair/replace broken electrical goods, warm home, leisure and hobbies</p>				<p>Yes</p>
<p>Place: Area deprivation – where you live, where you work</p>				<p>Yes</p>
<p>Prospects: Socioeconomic background – social class i.e. parents education, employment and income , educational achievement.</p>				<p>Yes</p>

<p>Stage 8: What are the positive and negative impacts?</p>		
<p>Impacts.</p>	<p>Positive</p>	<p>Negative</p>
<p>Please detail the potential positive and/or negative impacts you have highlighted above. Detail the impacts and describe those affected.</p>	<p>Committee meetings are more accessible to those with a protected characteristic of disability as they are all available to view online</p>	
	<p>Better use of Council resources</p>	

Stage 9: Have any of the affected groups/areas been involved, engaged with or consulted?

<p>If yes, please give details of how this was done and what the results were. If no, how have you ensured that you can make an informed decision about mitigating steps?</p>	<p>No as virtual committees commenced during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>
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Stage 10: What mitigating steps will be taken to remove or reduce negative impacts?

	Mitigating Steps	Timescale
<p>These should be included in any action plan at the back of this form.</p>		

Stage 11: What monitoring arrangements will be put in place? How the EIA will be used to monitor the proposal

<p>These should be included in any action plan (for example customer satisfaction questionnaires).</p>	<p>Full Council are due to consider this matter again on 14 January 2021.</p>
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Stage 12: What is the outcome of the Assessment?

<p>Please complete the appropriate box/boxes</p>	1	No negative impacts have been identified –please explain.
	<p>No negative impacts have been identified by the continuation of virtual committees.</p>	
	2	<p>Negative Impacts have been identified, these can be mitigated - please explain. * Please fill in Stage 13 if this option is chosen.</p>

	3	The activity will have negative impacts which cannot be mitigated fully – please explain. * Please fill in Stage 13 if this option is chosen

* Stage 13: Set out the justification that the activity can and should go ahead despite the negative impact.

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Stage 14: Sign off and authorisation.

Sign off and authorisation.	1) Service and Team	Business Services, Legal & Governance		
	2) Title of Policy/Activity	Virtual Committee Meetings (if appropriate)		
	3) Authors: I have completed the equality impact assessment for this policy/activity.	Name: Laura Bremner Position: Acting Legal Service Manager (Governance) Date: 31/8/20 Signature:	Name: Position: Date: Signature:	
		Name: Position: Date: Signature:	Name: Position: Date: Signature:	
	4) Consultation with Service Manager	Name: Date:		
	5) Authorisation by Director or Head of Service	Name: Position: Date:	Name: Position: Date:	

	6) If the EIA relates to a matter that has to go before a Committee, Committee report author sends the Committee Report and this form, and any supporting assessment documents, to the Officers responsible for monitoring and the Committee Officer of the relevant Committee.	Page: 111 Date:
	7) EIA author sends a copy of the finalised form to: equalities@aberdeenshire.gov.uk	Date: