REPORT of
DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY, PERFORMANCE AND GOVERNANCE

to
COUNCIL
18 MARCH 2021

FUTURE COMMITTEE MEETINGS OPTIONS

1.   PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1   To update members of the approach and options for Council and Committee meetings from 6 May 2021, when the current remote meeting legislation expires.

2.   RECOMMENDATIONS

(i)   That Members review the details set out in this report and are assured that Officers are doing all that they can to scope future options with the limited information provided;

(ii)   That final decision on the future approach to meetings be delegated to the Director of Strategy, Performance and Governance, in consultation with the Leader of the Council.

3.   SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES

3.1   Current provisions to allow virtual committee meetings to take place run out on 6 May2021, and the Government view is that primary legislation would be needed to extend this, and they do not have time to pass it.

3.2   The Association of Democratic Services Officers and many colleagues across Local Government are challenging this view, and pushing for an extension to Government, with the long-term vision that Council meetings could work at least partly virtually, as is the expectation across the working world.

3.3   A High Court Legal challenge is also currently in progress based on legal advice which claims there are "forceful arguments" that the Local Government 1972 Act as it currently exists allows meetings to be held remotely or in hybrid form when current provisions under the Coronavirus Act 2020 expire on 6 May.

3.4   The Local Government Association (LGA) has previously advised that Councillors meeting would count more as a 'gathering' as they are not technically employed. As of 6 May 2021 the expected rule for gatherings according for the government roadmap would be 'rule of six'. This could also legally prevent physical meetings, and we are investigating this point.

Our Vision: Sustainable Council – Prosperous Future

3.5   Based on what we currently know, the headline options in the absence of legislation, ranked in current order of score for achievability and impact are:

- return to emergency powers - Corporate Leadership Team to make urgent decisions after discussion with the Leader of the Council;

- hold 'online working groups' where members review and discuss papers and Directors take these views onboard

- reduced schedule of meetings – running socially distanced offsite- i.e. one Council meeting per month;

- a quorate of committee members attend at the Chamber;

- all members return to physical meetings but in an off-site larger space;

- an early Annual meeting is held to establish smaller Committee sizes that can meet in the Chamber at distance;

- all Members return to the chamber.

and these are further detailed in **APPENDIX 1**.

3.6   We expect that if physical meetings can return, there may still be prescription for social distancing, and adaptations to room layouts to allow for a Covid-secure approach, and it is likely that there will be a cost and resource implication for many of these options.

3.7   When the current legislation ceases, there will currently be no provision for a 'hybrid' approach, whereby some members and officers can dial in virtually and others can be present in the Chamber.

4.   CONCLUSION

4.1   As we do not have full guidance around expected social distancing measures in May 2021, potential continuation of shielding for the vulnerable and each individual Member's situation, officers are currently scoping these options, but to allow for an option to be implemented by 6 May 2021, request a delegation of the final decision.

5.   IMPACT ON STRATEGIC THEMES

5.1   The final approach taken will enable decision making to take place in the absence of remote meetings from 6 May 2021.

6.   IMPLICATIONS

(i)   **Impact on Customers** – Removing live stream of meetings would be less accessible (online public attendance has been higher than in person) and there are further issues with allowing the public to observe meetings physically that will need to be reviewed

(ii)   **Impact on Equalities** – Several of these options could impact more heavily on those in vulnerable categories.

(iii)   **Impact on Risk** – Return to physical meetings could put staff and members at a greater risk than current position, or be a less inclusive approach

(iv)   **Impact on Resources (financial)** – Likely to be a cost to adapt meeting space, and hire meeting space if specific options are preferred.

(v)   **Impact on Resources (human)** – Many of these options will require additional facilities support, and staff support to establish.

(vi)   **Impact on the Environment** – None.

(vii)   **Impact on Strengthening Communities** – None.

Background Papers: None.

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