

Governance & Audit Committee

Item
8

28 July 2020

Report of	Assistant Director of Corporate & Improvement Services	Author	Hayley McGrath 508902
Title	Initial summary of Digital Council Meetings		
Wards affected	Not applicable		

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 At the meeting on 23 June 2020 the committee requested a brief summary of the implementation of virtual committee meetings, that were required as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper gives a summary overview of the work and meetings that have taken place so far, and invites Councillors, and officers, to provide their views to help inform a detailed review of digital meetings, which will be reported to the committee later in the year.

2.0 Recommended Decisions

- 2.1 To consider and note the summary of virtual meetings undertaken by Colchester Borough Council since June 2020.
- 2.2 To note the future review of digital meetings.

3.0 Reasons for Recommended Decisions

- 3.1 The process for digital meetings is still being refined. Therefore, this report is for information only and further work will be undertaken to provide a more comprehensive review of digital meetings and any necessary decisions that may be required.

4.0 Alternative Options

- 4.1 As the report is for consideration and noting there are no alternative options.

5.0 Summary of Work Undertaken

- 5.1 The government decision in March 2020 to put 'lockdown' restrictions in place meant that it was not possible to have face-to-face committee meetings and Council business was effectively put on hold whilst an alternative solution could be found.
- 5.2 Whilst the Coronavirus legislation allowed for annual meetings to be postponed until 2021, it was necessary to ensure that decision making could be resumed as soon as possible.
- 5.3 Whilst the Council had been investigating digital meetings previously, there had been no decision on digital solutions or processes. Therefore, a suitable video conferencing system had to be implemented prior to the decision-making process resuming at the beginning of June. A process for allowing members of the public to still have their say was also implemented.

- 5.4 The Council was not using any video conferencing systems prior to the pandemic and as a result there was a very short time frame to identify a suitable system, roll it out to all users, produce user guides and train all participants on how to conduct meetings, as well as ensure that they all had suitable equipment to allow them to participate in meetings.
- 5.5 Since 01 June a full 'cycle' of committee meetings has taken place with every member now having taken part in at least one meeting. The meetings are live streamed on YouTube and are available for download. The full list of meetings, and the on-line viewing numbers are shown below:

Meeting	Date	Views
Scrutiny	01/06/2020	292 views
Cabinet	03/06/2020	462 views
Licensing	10/06/2020	138 views
Policy and Public Initiatives Panel	17/06/2020	153 views
Planning	18/06/2020	429 views
Governance and Audit	23/06/2020	161 views
North Essex Parking Partnership	25/06/2020	100 views
Licensing Sub-Committee	01/07/2020	219 views
Scrutiny	07/07/2020	292 views
Cabinet	08/07/2020	340 views
Planning	09/07/2020	125 views
Local Plan	14/07/2020	365 views
Council	15/07/2020	329 views

- 5.6 The feedback from members, officers and the public has generally been very good. Whilst there is a natural desire to have face to face meetings all participants are getting used to the new skills of digital meetings. Democratic Services have not received any specific complaints or concerns about the meetings.
- 5.7 Some of the benefits of the digital meetings have included the ability of members to participate from wherever they are based, no paper agendas for any meeting and greater accessibility for the public - one of the public speakers for the Licensing Sub-committee joined from an overseas location and stated that she would not have been able to participate previously as she could not attend in person. The number of online views for each committee is considerably more than the previous audio streaming.
- 5.8 There have been some connection issues as members get used to the new systems and these have predominantly about logging on and use of microphones and videos. There is a guide to meeting etiquette, and on the whole participants are following it.
- 5.9 Digital meetings do require more officer support than physical meetings, especially at the start of each meeting. Currently at least two Democratic Officers and an IT support officer will be online to assist members with logging on, changing the names that are displayed, checking video and audio connections and signalling if a participant has dropped out, which may require a meeting to be put on hold until they can reconnect.

6.0 Future Review of Digital Meetings

- 6.1 Currently there has been no decision about a timescale for physical meetings to be restarted and risk assessments are being undertaken to set out proposals for how limited meetings may be able to take place, in line with government regulations.

- 6.2 Whilst there have been no significant issues with regards to the digital meetings that have taken place, a full analysis needs to be undertaken to review the success and future options for digital meetings.
- 6.3 Therefore further work will be undertaken to review the full impact of digital meetings and set out recommendations for future actions, to ensure that there is a full and robust decision-making process whilst at the same time allowing for any social distancing regulations.
- 6.4 To help inform the review process all members will be invited to share their experiences of digital meetings and any suggestions they may have. A final report will be submitted to this committee later in the year.

7.0 Standard References

- 7.1 There are no particular references to the Strategic Plan; consultation or publicity considerations or financial; community safety; health and safety; risk management or environmental and sustainability implications.