

Extract from the minutes of the Governance and Audit Committee meeting on 20 October 2020

229.Review of Remote (Digital) Council Meetings

Andrew Weavers, Strategic Governance Manager, attended to present the report and assist the Committee with their enquiries. The Committee heard that the report had been prepared prior to the majority of Essex being placed into the Government's high level 'Tier 2' restrictions in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, it was felt that this served to emphasise the recommendations contained within the report. In the future the safety of Councillors and Officers had to be of paramount importance, and concerns around the health of Officers and Councillors should be taken into account when considering the need for face to face or hybrid meetings at the time being.

The Committee were advised that carrying out remote meetings was authorised under Regulations introduced in April 2020, however, these are due to expire on 6 May 2021 unless extended by the Government. Andrew considered that Local Authorities should have the flexibility to continue to hold meetings remotely beyond this date, as it looked as though remote meetings would be a necessity for the duration of the current municipal year.

The Committee were reminded that public meetings were currently being held using Zoom, and broadcast to the public via the Council's YouTube channel. As part of the review of these remote meetings, a survey of Councillors, Officers and the public had been undertaken, leading to responses from thirty two Councillors and thirteen Officers, but sadly no responses from members of the public, despite the deadline for responses having been extended. Despite the lack of public response, it was pointed out that levels of public engagement with Council meetings was higher than ever before.

The results of the Councillor and Officers surveys had been collated in the report, and Members were advised that overall there had been a positive reaction to remote meetings, together with the work that had been undertaken by the Democratic Services and IT teams. Drawing some key statistics from the survey responses demonstrated that overall, sixty three percent of Councillors were in favour of remote or hybrid meetings, with ninety percent of responses indicating that the correct equipment possessed to allow participation in remote meetings. Andrew noted that some references had been made to the provision of a second computer screen for Councillors to assist their participation in remote meetings, confirming that this would be arranged any Councillor who wished it. Continuing to look at the results of the survey, eighty eight percent of Councillors felt that they had received sufficient

training to enable them to participate in remote meetings, and additional training would be made available for any Councillor who requested it.

With regard to the Have Your Say! arrangements at remote meetings, the Committee heard that these were working well, including where representations were being made on behalf of third parties. It was suggested that the ability to contribute remotely to all meetings should be retained in the future.

The attention of the Committee was drawn to the viewing statistics for public meetings which were contained within the report. It was pointed out that a comparison to the number of listeners to the audio broadcasts of meetings from the previous year, revealed a rise of sixty four percent when compared with the number of views of remote meeting broadcasts.

With regard to behaviours in meetings, seventy two percent of Councillors felt that the Remote Meetings Protocol was helpful. Some areas of concern had been highlighted, for example Members disappearing from their screens during a meeting, and although some of the issues were addressed by the Protocol, the Committee may wish to consider how this would be refined further to provide greater assistance.

The move to providing only digital agendas had been a success, with significant savings made on printing, and the provision of only digital agendas would continue in the future, unless there was a demonstrable need for a printed agenda document to be provided for individual Councillors.

It was proposed that Committee briefing meetings should continue to be held remotely as a matter of course, but that individual Committee Chairs should retain the flexibility to be in a room with Officers if necessary during a meeting if the business being dealt with was complicated or the meeting had a particularly large number of participants.

The mechanisms used for taking decisions in remote meetings were considered, and the Committee heard that formalising decisions taken in meetings potentially presented its own problems, particularly when all participants were not visible on the screen at the same time. It was suggested that the rules be revised to consider when a named vote was required, or when a decision could be taken less formally. It was pointed out to the Committee that, with a couple of notable exceptions, the length of meetings had only increased by a small amount on average, and the majority of Councillors who responded to the survey felt that the current times allowed for breaks were adequate. In spite of this, sixty nine percent of Councillors felt that the current maximum of four hours for a meeting was too long, and the Committee was invited to consider whether any change in the rules was appropriate.

It was suggested that Officers undertake further work on the potential provision of more sophisticated equipment to further support ongoing remote or hybrid meetings, with a further report on this subject to be presented to this Committee in due course. However, it was noted that there was currently no budget available to fund this.

In conclusion, Andrew recommended that the Authority continue with remote meetings but keep them under review. Hybrid meetings were an option for the future,

provided health and safety concerns could be dealt with, and Officers and Councillors were happy to attend these. Hybrid meetings were, however, not being recommended at this time.

Councillor Pearson expressed his thanks to Officers for the work undertaken in getting the remote meetings running so smoothly, and he remarked on the importance of the etiquette of remote meetings and presenting to the public and colleagues in an appropriate manner.

Councillor Goacher confirmed that he would support all the six proposals contained within the report, and he felt that the Council should not return to 'in person' meetings during the current Covid situation, although he would support hybrid meetings in the future. Speaking strictly of a time post-Covid, Councillor Goacher did express some concerns around the ability of all residents to be able to use technology to access remote meetings, and commented that remote meetings also removed some of the social, collaborative and ceremonial aspects of more traditional public meetings. Having studied the report, Councillor Goacher confirmed that he was particularly pleased with the level of engagement with public meetings via YouTube, with some meetings having been viewed hundreds of times, which was far in excess of attendance for physical meetings. Councillor Pearson supported the comments made, and he would support some meetings being carried out remotely ad infinitum where this was appropriate.

Councillor Dundas agreed with Councillor Goacher's comments, and he felt it important that in the future at least meetings of full Council were held in person as this would only be five times a year and would show the public some of the work of the Council. He consented that any future meetings would be dependent on government guidance following the ending of the current regulations on 7 May 2021. Councillor Dundas confirmed his support for the recommendations in the report, and commented on some of the survey outcomes, explaining that he did not feel that remote meetings were necessarily longer, and noting that remote meetings seemed to be more popular with officers than Members.

Councillor Pearson added his support to a review of the equipment being used and provided to Councillors and Officers with the intention of ensuring that participation in remote meetings was as easy as possible.

Councillor Willetts confirmed to the Committee that he would be happy to continue with remote meetings for ever and suggested that the Council lobby government as strongly as possible to ensure that this was possible in the future. He expressed his belief that the way that Local Government carried out business would change fundamentally in the future, particularly in areas like Colchester which included large rural areas with Councillors who had to journey some distance to attend physical meetings. He reminded the Committee that the purpose of any Committee was to take decisions, and not to provide entertainment, and he suggested that increased viewing of meetings should not necessarily be taken as an indication of successful governance. Councillor Willetts went on to express sought assurances as to how remote meetings would work with professionals attending and actively participating in the meeting. He further enquired whether the Protocol could be revisited to clarify whether or not Councillors were required to have their cameras on throughout the entirety of a meeting, citing examples where Councillors may wish to turn their cameras off by way of protest at a point being made in a meeting. He confirmed that

he was an advocate of holding more frequent meetings remotely as these did not place the same strain on Officers and Councillors with regard to travel time, but that the more frequent meetings should then be shorter in duration. Councillor Willetts final point was to urge consideration be given to a more formal webcast system if there was ever a return to formal meetings, and that budget issues should not stop the Committee supporting this.

Councillor Pearson noted the comments about the length of meetings, and he raised the potential health issue of spending too long in front of a computer screen, suggesting that it may be more appropriate to introduce a break in meetings after ninety minutes.

Councillor McCarthy expressed his strong disagreement with points previously made that remote meetings should continue forever, as he felt that wholly remote meetings were damaging to democracy and decision making, which was better done in person or via hybrid meetings, once this was possible again. He also addressed points previously made about the length of meetings, and he felt that meetings were not too long, and there had only been two meetings which had approached the four hour mark, with the average meeting being about two hours in length, which was appropriate. Councillor McCarthy further requested that an additional report on remote working be presented to this Committee in March 2021, to re-evaluate the position in the light of the situation at that time.

Councillor Barlow suggested that the change in the way meetings were being held would lead to a change in the way that they were expected to be held in the future. With many people now used to remote meetings for their work, careful consideration was needed to determine which business needed to be dealt with in person, and which could be dealt with remotely, and the Council would need to adapt to people's changing expectations. He supported the use of remote meetings for briefings, and suggested that the use of the 'chat function' contained within remote meeting software should be considered during public meetings, as this may enable simple questions to be asked and answered quickly without having to interrupt the main meeting. He also considered that ways of voting in remote meetings should be considered to potentially avoid the need for taking a roll call of Members each time a decision was required which could be time consuming, particularly in a Full Council meeting.

Andrew Weavers confirmed that he did not envisage a complete return to meetings in person after the pandemic, but rather considered that a form of hybrid meetings should be adopted to allow those Members who wished to, to attend in person. This would also allow Officers and members of the public to address the meeting remotely, and in offering more flexibility would allow greater participation in Council meetings.

RECOMMENDED to Full Council:

- (a) All meetings continue to be remote (digital) by default and hosted via Zoom and live streamed by YouTube for the remainder of this municipal year. However, this be kept under review in the light of evolving Government guidance and legal requirements.

- (b) All briefings for committee and panel chairs and group spokespersons be held remotely.
- (c) The possibility of hybrid and face to face meetings be considered when both Government Guidance and legislation permits and following a Covid- 19 health and safety risk assessment for each meeting.
- (d) Chairs of meetings retain flexibility to determine how formal votes are conducted taking into account the following principles:-
 - (i) Non-controversial items be agreed by the chair asking participants to indicate verbally whether anyone is against a proposal.
 - (ii) Where the subject matter is controversial or relates to a quasi -judicial matter, a roll call of councillors be taken to ensure transparency.
- (e) Chairs of meetings retain the option of being physically present with officers when required, suitably socially distanced, whether it be due to procedural complexity of the meeting or of the nature of business to be transacted.
- (f) Government be lobbied to extend the Regulations to enable remote and hybrid meetings to continue beyond May 2021.