



# **Remote Meetings Questionnaire**

## **Officers**

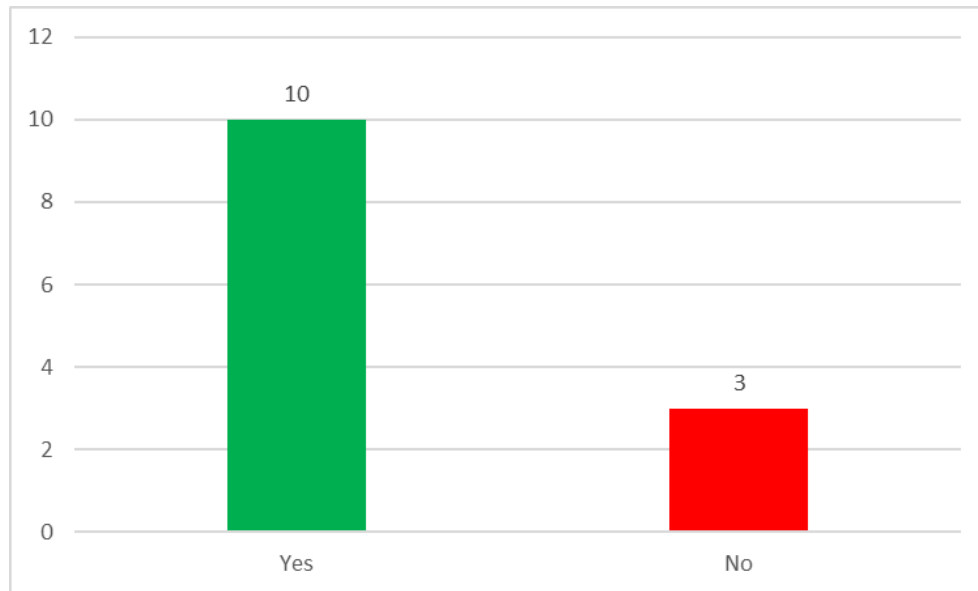
### **Introduction**

Since May 2020 following the Covid-19 Coronavirus lockdown, Colchester Borough Council has been conducting committee meetings on-line.

Now that all committees have met on-line, at least once, Officers were asked to provide their views on how they have found the process, and if they have any suggestions on how remote meetings can be improved going forward.

## Q1. Do you have the right equipment to enable you to fully participate in remote meetings?

If not, what do you feel would help you?



### Comments:

Now I have a new laptop I do.

I am currently using my phone to do Zoom meetings; it would be far better to download zoom on to my cbc device.

Yes but these are all personal equipment, not CBC equipment.

I have appropriate equipment (although it is my own and not CBC).

Some colleagues still have Wyse boxes!

A CBC LAPTOP! For presenting at committee I will need to have two screens, one for the webcam and another for documents/notes.

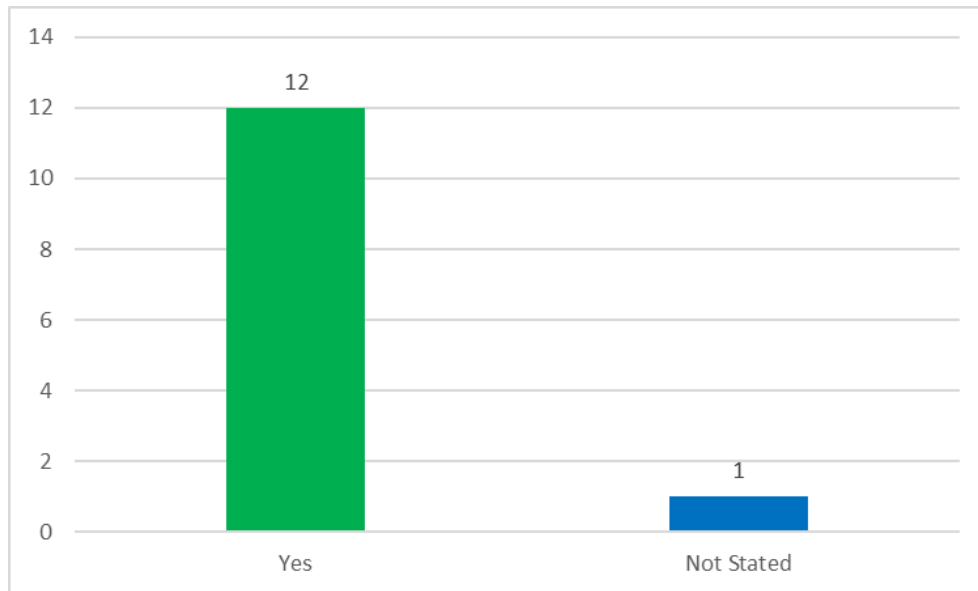
Equipment fine - wifi sometimes iffy but that is my problem!

Yes but reliant on having laptop for Teams/Zoom and desktop for documents. Laptop has failed a couple of times.

Not really if it is on ZOOM.

## 2. Do you feel that you have received sufficient training to be able to participate in remote meetings?

If not, what further training do you feel that you need?



### Comments:

Happy with the training I received.

Yes but refresher training would be useful as I am attending less remote meetings due to the change in delegation.

I'm wondering whether Members have access to the online sharepoint area for training? If they do, some general zoom training would be good to go on there (and also for officers).

Training should be targeted at those who are struggling to use the technology (some Members and Officers seem to have a more difficult time). I believe there is an enabling officer in IT now - I know they are busy but targeted training is helpful and they could be used for this type of training.

Yes - Mandy Chidgey did a great session before her retirement.

Yes - well supported by Democratic Services - thank you!

### Q3. What do you feel are the benefits and disadvantages of remote meetings?

#### 3a. Benefits:

The answers to this question have been grouped into the below themes:

Better focus on planning issues and less political group actions.

For planning committee I find the IT much better at home - SharePoint on the iPad via HDMI to a TV in the Council Chamber always felt one step from simply not working. It works well at home.

Less officer time, faster resolutions, information is quicker to obtain, easier to prepare for, better for the environment (i.e. not required to attend Town Hall).

Time efficiency (no travel time)  
Sharing documents on screen ensures that these can be seen clearly by all involved

Brings better discipline in terms of debate and discussion. Allows those who cannot be physically present to participate remotely.

Decision making based on merits rather than members being swayed by presence of large crowd. Increased delegation so committee can focus on important matters.

You get to deal with the issues at hand

Huge benefit in not having to travel, saving in fuel and time, and kinder where meetings are held at more antisocial hours. Could be played back if any doubt over proceedings.

More viewers - arguably better participation and more democratic recorded for Members of the public / officers.

Don't get home so late.

Less formality - time to eat before evening meetings for eg. as no travel  
No travel and less opening of buildings - carbon reduction and corporate savings on energy As AD it means I can be available but not have to sit in the room for every meeting (if an item is presented).

### 3b. Disadvantages:

The answers to this question have been grouped into the below themes:

Less personal contact and informal conversations before and after.

Public feel less engaged and that meetings are less accessible.

Voting takes longer by needing a roll call.

Not much atmosphere online. Contentious applications generate a tension that's hard to match when they are heard in the Council chamber. Pure electricity on your Thursday night!

Very tiring (more so than face-to-face meetings)

Difficult to forget relationships.

Unable to have informal, 'off-line' conversations to build relationships and catch-up.

The heckling, the chanting, the ominous/angry looks from objectors. I can live without it though.

Meetings more informal and not as well structured as the usual interjections from officers to clarify matters and keep the meeting moving are harder to do - you can't catch the Chairman's eye over zoom.

Not being able to pick up on body language.

IT/internet errors (if they occur).

Lack of physical contact and interaction means some of the more informal communication between participants does not take place.

No way of cutting off if people go too far.

Unable to control background noise.

Difficult when only attending for one agenda item and are waiting to be called. I waited for 1hr and 45 minutes sitting at my screen and was then advised I could stand down.

Work station is in a family room and difficult to use if attending a evening session. Family are unable to watch TV etc

#### 4. Do you feel that there are any areas of remote meetings that could be improved?

I think Democratic Services have done a brilliant job in such a short timescale - I think they are responsive and pro-active and work incredibly hard in some very difficult situations.

Voting process could be made more dynamic.

Making sure that you the meeting is run progressively and in a timely manner. Improving all the time i.e. removing public speakers at appropriate time.

Enabling/providing staff to have faster internet connection would be an improvement; Ensuring staff have large screens so that documents/plans can be viewed clearly and all/most attendees of the meetin

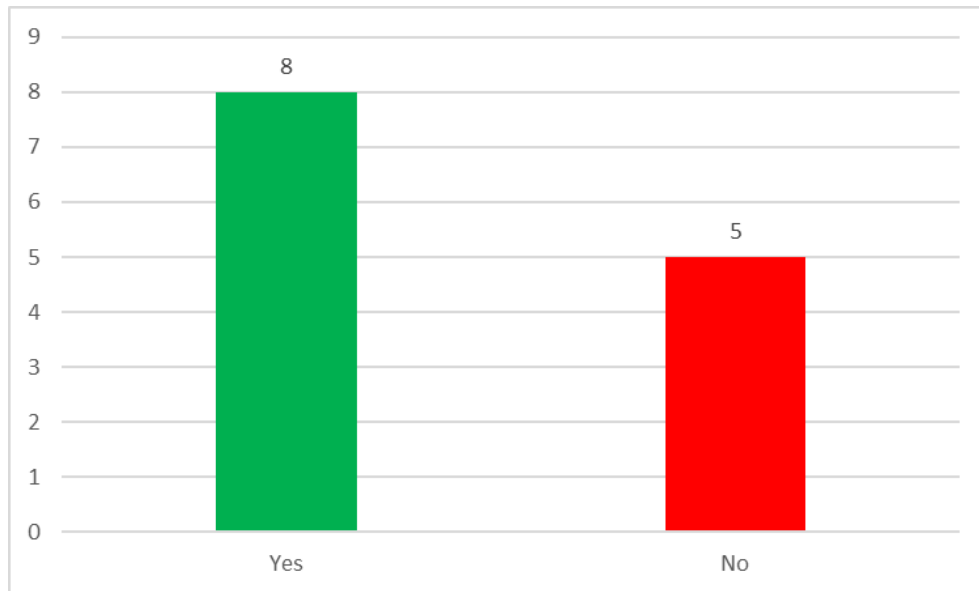
I think they work well.

It works perfectly well if chaired properly.

Limit member comments/questions to a maximum of two individuals before officer allowed to respond.

**Q5. Do you feel that you are given enough break times during meetings?**

**If not, what do you think is a reasonable time between breaks?**



**Comments:**

Reasonable breaks have been given during planning committee meetings.

Need break after two hours

2 hours

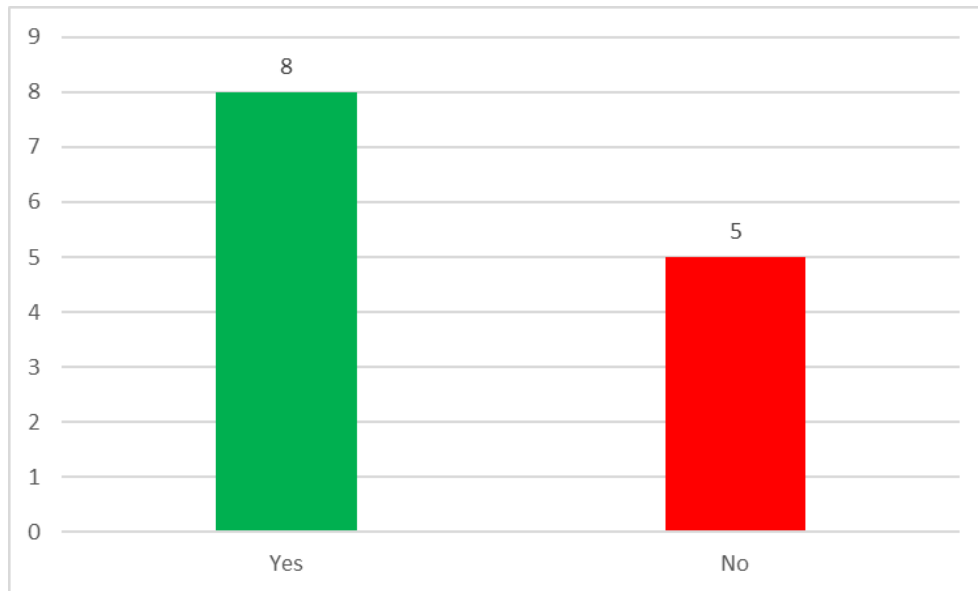
No - you need at least 10 minutes break between meetings days when I have 4/5 meetings I am exhausted.

Breaks are usually judged by the agenda item or around 8pm which isn't always the best time.

We don't tend to break in our meetings as they are generally hearings.

**Q6. Currently the maximum meeting time allowed is four hours, do you feel that is appropriate for remote meetings?**

**If not, what should the maximum meeting length be?**



**Comments:**

It depends on each case but four hours with a break seems reasonable to me.

4 hours is a considerable time, although Planning Committee meetings can be longer (as a necessity if there are a number of applications to discuss and deliberations are extensive) - 5 hours should cover this.

Dependent on the topic/subject and breaks permitted.

I think 4 hours is sufficient.

3 hours including breaks would be preferable. Remote meetings are hard work/tiring especially after a full day's work.

Yes, four hours is plenty.

No longer than 4 hours.

3.5 - with a break

I can handle 4. Any more would be a push though.

I haven't had a four hour meeting yet but I would think this is too long.

There is likely to be a break within the 4 hours. I have had training sessions on screen for 4 hours and this has been a max.



**Q7. If you present or advise a committee or panel, are there any particular challenges that you face performing that role in a remote meeting?**

WIFI dropping out!

Just ICT - worry that something won't work or connection will be lost and the need for either hard copies of documents (which isn't ideal) or another device.

Working from home and having home commitments/distractions. Also, the working environment at home is a little cramped so not overly comfortable for a long meeting.

Advising the chair privately can be quite challenging - perhaps the protocol should be that all chairs/advising officers must have a WhatsApp group to facilitate

No - I find it easy. If it's a PPT, I think as long as you liaise with the Democratic Services Officer to ensure you've decided who's driving the PPT then it should be fine.

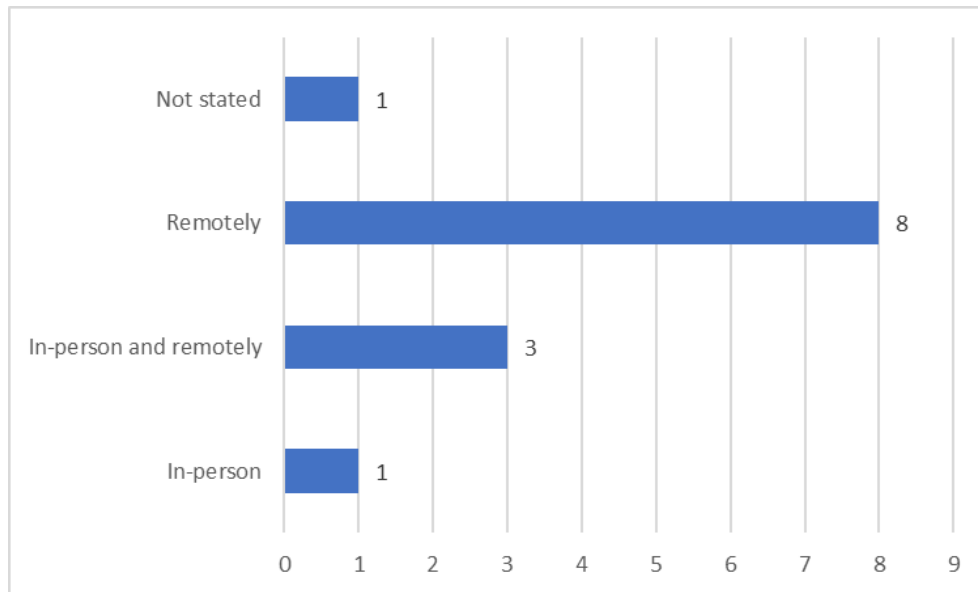
It is difficult to catch the Chairman's eye, and to engage with other officers individually.

Not being able to communicate with colleagues (other than by text or Teams chat) is a little difficult - queries are more difficult to resolve.

The protocols around being able to speak or contribute when presenting slides on Teams, as the presenter you are unable to see reactions or notifications.

When waiting to be called to present. You do not join the meeting the usual way and are only required for one item. This is fine if your item is first but more difficult if you are further down the agenda. You have no idea if the meeting has started or if it is over running whether you will be called in the next 2 minutes or the next hour, you just sit waiting anxiously.

## 8. How do you think future meetings should be conducted?



### Comments:

Licensing Hearings would be better conducted in person than over Zoom. The level of informality afforded by a virtual platform is not ideal in appeal cases and hearings where outcomes can be appealed to court and people's livelihoods depend on the proper consideration of all matters.

Ultimately, remote meetings are likely to be more efficient for attendees (due to reduced travel time etc) and more accessible for the public (as they can view online), but the working practices are quite difficult in my role at Planning Committee.

A mixture of online and town hall.

Online/virtual is definitely the best choice.

If you are waiting to be called you should be advised that the meeting has started, the time when you are expected to be called, if the meeting is over running and the new time.

Evening meetings are definitely better for officers online as they have often had a full day of meetings anyway. I think a combination would be ideal.

All online. It's the future.

**9. Are there any other general issues or concerns, relating to remote meetings, that you would like to raise?**

Some attendees need to be aware that they have to be able to familiarise themselves with the technology fully - both the hardware and software - before taking part.

Staff need the equipment urgently, the roll out of laptops has been far, far too slow.

Publicity and notifications need to be automated for the public.