

20 October 2020

Report of	Assistant Director of Corporate & Improvement Services	Author	Andrew Weavers 282213
Title	Review of Remote (Digital) Council Meetings		
Wards affected	Not applicable		

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 At its meeting on 23 June 2020 the Committee requested a review of the implementation of remote committee meetings, which were required as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. An initial report was considered by the Committee on 28 July 2020, and following this Councillors, officers and members of the public were asked to provide their views to help inform the review of remote meetings and formulate recommendations how future meetings should be conducted.

2.0 Recommended Decisions

- 2.1 To consider and note the review of remote meetings undertaken by Colchester Borough Council since 1 June 2020.
- 2.2 To review the Remote Meetings Protocol and recommend whether any changes are required in the light of experience.
- 2.3 The following recommendations be made 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) Consider the possibility of hybrid and face to face meetings but only 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.
 - (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.

3.0 Reasons for Recommended Decisions

- 3.1 The Covid -19 pandemic and Government guidance and regulations required the Council's decision making to move to a digital only platform. As we move forward the Council needs to determine how its meetings are conducted safely, in accordance with relevant Government guidance and the legal position.

4.0 Alternative Options

- 4.1 A return to full face to face meetings or hybrid meetings. However, this is not possible at the current time due to the ongoing requirement to ensure that meetings are conducted in accordance with Government guidance including the need to maintain social distancing etc. The current rise in Covid 19 cases demonstrates the need to have a cautious approach to the return of face to face and or use of hybrid meetings.

5.0 Background

- 5.1 At its meeting on 28 July 2020 the Committee considered a report (attached at Appendix 1) on the initial review of remote meetings. The Committee's initial feedback on remote meetings was very positive, although highlighting a number of issues. This report provides the Committee with further details on how remote meetings could be conducted going forward.
- 5.2 All local authority meetings were required by law to be held with all participating councillors physically present in the same room. Due to the challenges of the Covid – 19 pandemic, the Government introduced The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panel (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Meetings) (England) Regulations 2020 ("the Regulations"). These came in to force on 4 April 2020 and apply to meetings taking place before 7 May 2021. The Regulations enabled Local Authorities:
- the flexibility to hold meetings at any time of day and on any day, to alter how frequently meetings can be held and to move or cancel meetings without requiring further notice.
 - to hold meetings remotely. For the purposes of any statutory requirement, members of the local authority are considered as attending a meeting if they can hear, and where practicable see, and be heard and, where practicable, be seen by other members and the public. This allowed for meetings to be held by remote means including via telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live webchat and live streaming. The "where practicable" wording is important because it means that it is not an absolute requirement that every participant can be seen all the time, even when they are speaking.
 - to make standing orders about remote attendance at meetings in relation to voting, access to documents and facilities that can be employed to allow the meeting to be held remotely to suit their own circumstances. (Remote Meetings Procedure Rules and Remote Meetings Protocol were agreed).
 - the "place" at which a local authority meeting is held is not confined to the council building. The "place" may be where the instigator or arranger of the meeting is, or electronic, digital or virtual locations such as internet locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers. It could be an officer's or member's home.
 - requirements for a meeting being "open to the public" are satisfied by a local authority holding the meeting remotely. This enabled local authorities to facilitate

and hold remote meetings outside of the council offices and/or remotely and allows for members of the public to attend remotely.

- where documents must be “open to inspection”, this is satisfied by the documents being published on the council’s website. Documents include notices, agendas, reports, background papers, minutes etc. The publication, posting or making available of documents at council offices includes publication on the Council’s website. The normal five clear working day notice of publication of agendas continue to apply.

5.3 This report highlights the benefits and some of the disadvantages of remote meetings. It is suggested that remote meetings are the way forward and Local Authorities should have the flexibility to utilise remote or hybrid meetings in the (post pandemic) future rather than reverting back wholly to “traditional” meetings. It is therefore recommended that the Government be lobbied to extend the Regulations to enable remote meetings to continue to be held in the future.

5.4 The latest advice from Government is that they *“continue to recommend that where meetings can take place digitally, without the need for face-to-face contact, they should do so. The regulations do not preclude physical or hybrid meetings. Where council buildings need to be used for physical meetings, these meetings must be managed within the social distancing guidance and principles.”* As Government has implemented new guidance and regulations in response to the second wave of the pandemic and measures put in place for probably the next six months, it is evident that we will need to continue with remote meetings until the end of the Municipal Year. However, we will keep this under review in light of changing Government advice and consider when we can safely hold either hybrid or face to face meetings.

6.0 Our Experience of remote meetings so far

6.1 Earlier this year we decided to live stream our formal decision-making meetings via Zoom on the Council’s YouTube channel. This has proved to be successful, with councillors, officers and the public able to participate, and has been relatively easy to use. Appendix 2 gives details of viewing figures of our remote meetings, compared to the listening figures (when only the audio recordings of meetings were available to the public) of the same meetings last year. Based on our experience it is suggested that we continue to use Zoom for all our public decision-making meetings. Remote meetings come with additional transparency and accountability and participants need to be aware of this at all times.

6.2 As part of the review a survey was carried out of councillors, officers and the public on their experiences of remote meetings and how they could be improved going forward. The survey was promoted via direct email, the website and on the Council’s social media channels. A total of thirty-two councillors (64%) and thirteen officers responded to the survey, unfortunately no members of the public responded, despite extending the deadline for completion. The full results of the survey are contained at Appendix 3 – councillors and Appendix 4 – officers.

6.3 Overall the surveys demonstrated a positive response to remote meetings, with very positive feedback to the Democratic and IT teams that have facilitated them. There were some issues raised, including items such as connectivity, resources, behaviours and lack of physical interaction and these are considered in the following paragraphs. The key question of whether meetings should be remote, hybrid or face to face in the future prompted the following response:

How should future meetings be conducted?	Councillors	Officers	Total
Remote	13	8	21
Face to face	8	1	9
Hybrid of remote and face to face	7	3	10
No view	4	1	5

As can be seen a majority of respondents felt that future meetings should be remote.

6.4 Some of the comments relating to future meetings included:

"I believe the Council ought to now return to the Town Hall and Rowan House. When Members and Officers can meet together, democracy will be better served. Virtual meetings ought to now be restricted to occasional training sessions, if essential."

"As now. But a firm reminder of meeting disciplines, hands etc and a mandatory break at 90 minutes unless the meeting is close to an end."

"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 officer role at Committee."

"All online. It's the future."

6.5 The Councillor survey also asked what the benefits and disadvantages of remote meetings were. Some of the comments in relation to benefits included:

"Being able to meet without risking staff and cllrs also it saves from an environmental perspective by reducing pollution"

"No travel means not getting stuck in traffic = more time with family therefore less resentment."

Some of the comments in relation to disadvantages included:

"Meetings take longer. Harder to concentrate on the discussion."

"Remote meetings do not allow members to fully interact with each other"

6.6 The councillor survey also asked what areas of remote meetings could be improved. Some of the comments included:

"Is there a way of looking/ referencing at the agenda details/page when on the screen. Looks like needing two screens, one for being on the meeting and one to follow the agenda."

"Currently just everyone learning that muting the microphone when not speaking is essential. As is ensuring it is muted and turning off the camera during breaks."

6.7 Remote meetings have required additional officer support to administer. Most face to face meetings are supported by one Democratic Services Officer who would be able to provide the clerking and advisory functions, as well as administer the live audio streaming software. For busy meetings an additional officer may have attended for the start of the meeting to help with the registration of members of the public. With remote meetings, there is increased preparation. Remote meetings themselves will continue to

require two Democratic Services Officers for the duration of the meeting, one providing the governance support role and one dealing with issues such as helping attendees join the meeting, monitoring the live stream, dealing with any connection issues, displaying presentations and reports. Particularly large or complex meetings, such as Full Council, have required a team of officers to support.

- 6.8 The introduction of remote meetings meant that the Council was required to invest in some additional hardware to provide councillors with appropriate equipment. This initial cost amounted to £3.5k. The annual Zoom licences amount to £500 both of these costs were coded to the Council's Covid 19 budget. Some councillors have also enquired whether they could have a second screen to assist them during meetings. The Council's IT team can facilitate this depending on the type of equipment being used. From the Councillor survey results 90% of councillors felt that they had the right equipment to enable them to participate in remote meetings. In addition, the councillor survey results indicated that 88% of councillors felt that they had received sufficient training to enable them to participate in remote meetings. We will seek to provide further training where necessary to ensure that all councillors can participate effectively in remote meetings.
- 6.9 One option for the future is hybrid meetings; i.e. where some participants are in a room (socially distanced) and others remote. This is not being suggested at this time in the light of current Government guidance and regulations. However, if this option becomes viable in the future it is one that we could pursue subject to a Covid-19 health and safety risk assessment being undertaken for each meeting. This could enable either the Moot Hall and/or the Grand Jury Room to be utilised for this purpose.
- 6.10 As well as maintaining public involvement in meetings through Have Your Say, there is evidence that remote meetings have helped increase public engagement with meetings and have improved the transparency of decision making. The table and graphs at Appendix 2 show the number of views of each meeting held remotely since June 2020. The figures show that more people are viewing through the YouTube live stream than listened through the audio stream for the similar period last year. There have been 5780 views of meetings on You Tube from June – September 2020. The comparative figure for listens on Audio Minutes over the same period last year was 3,517. This indicates that more members of the public are engaging with remote public meetings. We will continue to monitor and report on these levels. In addition, the Democratic Team has received some very positive feedback from some members of the public about the benefits of live streaming such as the comment below: -

“Also - well done for holding the Zoom sessions and streaming to YouTube. First time for a long time I have felt that I can easily dip-into council discussions on topics and hear first-hand considerations.”

- 6.11 Remote meeting by their very nature require the participants to behave differently than in face to face meetings. In preparation for the introduction of remote meetings, a protocol was prepared and agreed by the Group Leaders and circulated to all councillors. A copy is at Appendix 3. In view of some of the comments made in the responses to the councillor survey it is worth noting that the protocol emphasises: -

You should also try to avoid eating or drinking during the meeting unless this is necessary and can be done discretely. Although being held remotely, meetings are still formal and should be treated as though they were being held in person, with the same expectations of appearance and behaviour. Although it is easy to forget, given the nature of the meeting, Councillors will still be on public display throughout, potentially to a wider audience than would normally be in attendance at a physical meeting.

The results of the councillor survey revealed that 72% of respondents felt that the protocol was helpful. The Committee are invited to review the protocol and consider whether it needs updating in the light of experience and comments made during the course of the survey.

- 6.12 Remote meeting have proved particularly successful for the North Essex Parking Partnership Joint Committee meetings, obviating the need for councillors and officers to travel to different locations to attend meetings in the County. It has had a similar impact on the Colchester and Ipswich Museums Joint Committee.
- 6.13 Remote meetings have meant that agendas have been digital for all meetings. Whilst it can be more challenging for some meetings, digital agendas have proved successful and mean a budget saving with printing costs being eliminated. By way of background agenda printing costs in 2019/20 amounted to £11k. With digital agendas there is no need for a weekly delivery of papers to councillors and accordingly a further saving from ceasing home deliveries. It is proposed that all meeting agendas remain digital going forward, regardless of whether the meeting is face to face or remote unless there is a demonstrable need for a paper agenda for individual councillors.
- 6.14 One of the key benefits of remote meetings is the flexibility it provides to councillors and officers to join meetings, even if they are away from Colchester. A number of councillors have been able to join meetings whilst on holiday or otherwise away from Colchester, and in circumstances when they would have had to send apologies. With the Regulations making it clear that participation by a councillor at a remote meeting counts towards their attendance, the number of substitutions for meetings has been low.
- 6.15 All briefings for meeting chairs and group spokespersons have been remote during this period. The briefings have worked well and have eliminated councillor and officer travelling time etc. It is accordingly recommended that briefings for meeting chairs and group spokespersons remain remote going forward.
- 6.16 Remote meetings also bring challenges for those chairing meetings. The nature of remote meetings makes it difficult for a chair to seek officer informal advice during the meeting particularly from the Democratic Services Officer. However, with the Remote Meetings Protocol and a new way of working being embedded this becomes easier once the participants become more familiar with the meeting structure. The option is available for the chair of a meeting to be in a room with officers if required. This has been used for, Full Council due to the number of participants and the often procedurally complicated nature of the business being transacted.
- 6.17 Voting in remote meetings poses some challenges as compared with face to face meetings. The key in a remote meeting is transparency of decision making. It is important that the public viewing can understand how councillors have voted, as they would in a face to face meeting. This is particularly important for meetings where not all of the participants are visible on the screen. The Remote Meetings Procedure Rules provide that the chair of a meeting has flexibility to require that every question to be determined at a meeting is done so by either each councillor:
 - (i) stating verbally whether they are for, against or abstaining; or
 - (ii) to indicate by a show of hands.

In practice this has led to most decisions being taken via a roll call particularly where the decision may be controversial or quasi – judicial. Other decisions where there is consensus could be taken via a show of hands or for a request for any councillor to indicate verbal dissent to a decision. It is however important that the chair retains some flexibility to deal with individual circumstances. It is suggested that the Remote Meetings

Procedure Rules and the Protocol be amended to clarify the circumstances when it would be appropriate to have a roll call and when to have a more informal process.

- 6.18 Remote meetings required the Council to adapt how the public participated with meetings via “Have Your Say!”. This was changed to permit either written submissions of up to 500 words or a live remote video contribution of up to 3 minutes. Members of the public are required to register and provide a written copy of their submission by 12.00 noon the day before the meeting. Whilst the need for this has been queried on occasions, it has proved invaluable as it is allowed submissions to be read to the meeting when some speakers have had technical issues joining the meeting. Both methods have worked well, and it is suggested that these options are retained going forward. The same facility has been made available to visiting councillors to and it is suggested that this is also retained going forward even if the meeting is hybrid or a face to face meeting.
- 6.19 It had been anticipated that remote meetings would take longer than face to face meetings, due to the slightly more formal structure and procedures such as voting by roll call. An analysis of the length of the remote meetings held to 4 September 2020, against the length of the meetings over the corresponding period in 2019 has been completed and is at Appendix 6. This shows a fairly marginal increase in the average length of a meeting from 2 hours 10 minutes, to 2 hours 18 minutes. However, there are notable increases in the length of some meetings: Cabinet has increased from 1 hour 55 minutes to 2 hours 39 minutes on average, and the average length of a Scrutiny meeting has also increased. The length of Planning Committee meetings has been reduced, but this will partly be explained by the change in the scheme of delegation whereby fewer applications are being referred to Committee.
- 6.20 One of the issues highlighted in the councillor survey is concern about the impact of long meetings being conducted online. The survey highlighted that 63% of councillors felt that they were given enough break times during meetings. The survey also found that 69% councillors felt that the four-hour maximum duration for remote meetings was too long. It is recognised that there are some meetings that by their very nature will be longer meetings due to the complexity of the business to be transacted. The Committee is invited to consider whether it is necessary either amend the Protocol or Remote Procedure Rules to address the issue in light of the comments made in the survey.
- 6.21 At its meeting on 10 March 2020, the Committee made a recommendation to Cabinet that the potential benefits of webcasting public meetings be considered further. Cabinet endorsed this recommendation at its meeting on 8 July 2020. Whilst the streaming of remote meetings through YouTube has met this objective, should the Council move to hybrid or face to face meetings, there would be a need to look again at streaming options. In terms of costs of a solution for streaming hybrid meetings, the Council is currently looking at an inhouse solution using existing equipment and it is intended that this will be trialled at the Full Council meeting on 21 October 2020.
- 6.22 If a more sophisticated solution were to be sought through a third party provider, such as Public I, the costs are likely to be significant, and in line with those reported to the Committee on 10 March 2020 when it considered the benefits of webcasting, which are set out below:
1. *Lease contract – To provide and install three HD quality cameras, webcasting software, hosting and support for a typical 60-hour contract for any period between one and five years starting at £24k for one year, reducing to below £15k annually for a £72k five year contract.*

2. *Purchase and installation by the Council of cameras, AV rack, associated equipment, integration with microphones and cabling at a cost of approx. £19k plus Lease contract - Webcasting software, hosting, support and on-line monitoring for a typical 60-hour contract for any period between one and five years starting at £11k for one year, reducing to below £8k annually for a £38k five year contract.*

Public I have indicated that to deliver a solution that would serve hybrid meetings effectively would need to be slightly adjusted to include additional hardware. There is currently no budget for such a solution.

- 6.23 It is suggested that work on future webcasting options continue with a view to a costed proposal being submitted to the Committee in due course.

7.0 Financial Implications

As mentioned above the direct costs in enabling remote meetings amounted to £3.5k for councillors IT equipment and £500 for the annual Zoom licences. There is currently no identified budget for any webcasting solution.

8.0 Consultation Implications

A public consultation exercise has been undertaken, together with a survey of councillors and officers in order to inform this report.

9.0 Health and Safety Implications

- 9.1 Any hybrid or face to face meetings will be required to be Covid-19 safe. This means that in addition to complying with social distancing requirements etc, we will be required to undertake a Covid-19 health and safety risk assessment for individual meetings. We will also need to consider whether any participants are within any higher-risk health categories.
- 9.2 The Council's Corporate Health and Safety Officer has advised that it would be possible to configure the Grand Jury / West Committee Room to hold approx. 12 participants in its familiar layout. However, we would need tables/chairs set up reaching almost the length of both rooms due to the distancing needed between them. It may be possible to accommodate 2-4 of members of public at seats on the sides. Windows would be required to be open during the meeting to ensure good ventilation.
- 9.3 The Moot Hall could be configured with tables and chairs in roughly the Council Chamber layout but 1m distanced between each participant. This would go from the edge of the stage area to around slightly over half the length of the room, and then allow space behind for approximately 15-20 members of the public. The side doors leading to the outside balcony would need to be opened for ventilation, but it could be made Covid secure for meetings, however it would require stringent controls for entry and exit. As social distancing would be less than 2m face coverings would be required during the meeting.
- 9.4 Although not being recommended at this time, with 1m social distancing the Council chamber could be used by a maximum of 31 participants (roughly every other seat) and 4 members of public. However, as the Chamber has limited ventilation the fire escape door and window behind it would have to be kept open to increase the ventilation. Again, as participants would be under 2m apart face coverings would be required to be worn for the duration of the meeting.

- 9.5 The Council's Facilities Team are investigating whether the air handling units in the Town Hall provide fresh air as this may be sufficient ventilation instead of opening the windows and doors, although keeping them open to increase ventilation would be recommended where possible.
- 9.6 None of the options mentioned in 9.2 to 9.5 above are currently being recommended from a health and safety aspect. The current health and safety advice is to remain with remote meetings at this time, but keep it under review.

10.0 Environmental and Sustainability Implications

- 10.1 There are direct environmental benefits with remote meetings which support the Council's green agenda and assist towards its CO₂ reduction ambitions. The most obvious one being the reduction in car journeys and CO₂ emissions for journeys to and from the Town Hall for meetings.

The following estimates indicative and are based on all councillors attending meetings via a petrol car based on 29 Council meetings and 628 councillor one-way journeys from home to the Town Hall and back.

Length of round journey (miles)	Avoided miles travelled	Saving of CO ₂ (tonnes)	CO ₂ avoided from vehicle emissions (kg)
4	1256	0.37	370
6	1884	0.55	550
10	3140	0.91	910

- 10.2 In addition there will have been a saving in electricity consumption at the Town Hall. Whilst this is difficult to attribute purely to remote meetings, the 19/20 annual emission figures for the Town Hall were 224,696.6 kwh of electricity in 12 months, which is equivalent to 57.4 tonnes of CO₂. We would expect a significant reduction in 20/21 due to reduced use of the building both for meetings and other events.

11.0 Standard References

There are no particular references to the Strategic Plan; community safety; risk management, publicity implications

Appendices:

Appendix 1: 28 July 2020 Report to Governance and Audit Committee

Appendix 2: YouTube viewing statistics

Appendix 3: Councillor survey results

Appendix 4: Officer survey results

Appendix 5: Remote Meetings Protocol

Appendix 6: Length of meetings