

UPDATE REPORT ON REMOTE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Report of the Monitoring Officer

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 A standalone report to Scrutiny Co-ordination updating the committee on the legislation relating to remote meetings, the proposals and justifications for moving all committee meetings to the Connect Remote platform and a review of public engagement in and viewings of remote meetings to date.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Since the Prime Minister introduced new guidance at the end of March 2020 on social distancing, the Democratic Services and IT Teams have been collaborating at pace to enable the Council to hold committee meetings virtually whilst still adhering to its statutory duties and the new regulations on remote meetings that came into force on 4 April 2020.
- 2.2 The Council held its first virtual meeting on 26 May 2020, being a quorate only, politically proportionate Annual Council Meeting.
- 2.3 Since then the Council has held all of the committee meetings scheduled in its business programme remotely including a council meeting on 9 July 2020 with 61 members in attendance together with officers.
- 2.4 The council has been able to facilitate public participation at Area Committees. Public questions have been submitted and read out by officers at the Cabinet and the Council Meetings.
- 2.5 It is intended that wherever possible, all Council meetings (including committee meetings), will continue by way of virtual committee meetings until the guidance on social distancing is amended to allow such meetings to take place physically in a practical and safe manner.
- 2.6 Further regulations were published on 4 July 2020 suggesting that meetings could take place if it was safe (adhering to all related social distancing guidance) to do so and if remote meetings were not possible. Nevertheless, the position that meetings should continue to be held remotely wherever possible is supported in recent statements by the LGA, LLG and ADSO.

3. UPDATE ON TECHNOLOGY

- 3.1 Following the regulations published on 4 April 2020 the Council facilitated members being able join meetings remotely by Microsoft Teams. The majority of meetings since then have been held on Microsoft Teams.

- 3.2 From early June 2020 the Council has taken part in trialling a new platform called Connect Remote which is a product designed by the Council's current webcaster, public-i-tv.
- 3.3 Several meetings have now taken part via Connect Remote and the feedback from Members is that they prefer Connect Remote to Microsoft Teams.
- 3.4 As of 13 July 2020 the voting function became available on Connect Remote. The platform also enables users to see all other attendees (unlike Microsoft Teams) and also has a function where advice can be privately provided to the Chair by the Clerk in a "private chat function".
- 3.5 Of significant importance is that Connect Remote can be webcast by the Democratic Services Officer who clerks the meeting meaning that:
 - 3.5.1 more than one meeting can be webcast and take place at the same time (i.e. Area Committees and Scrutiny Committees) avoiding the need to move meetings; and
 - 3.5.2 the one Democratic Services officer who has so far had to attend every meeting (as well as the lead clerk) to webcast the meetings will no longer have to do so.
- 3.6 There is one technical issue that remains to be resolved and that is that Connect Remote cannot currently be used over Council laptops remotely outside of the Council's offices (only in the offices). This has meant that officers who do not have a Council iPad have had to join on their own devices or telephones (personal or Council). Once the new Always VPN system is rolled out then all officers will be able to join a Connect Remote meeting outside of the office on their Council laptop.
- 3.7 Guidance will be provided on how to use Connect Remote and the previous guidance relating to etiquette for meetings Microsoft Teams will be amended and re-circulated as necessary.
- 3.8 Test meetings have already been conducted by Democratic Services and attended by several members and officers both on a group and one-to-one basis.

4. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- 4.1 There has been a significant increase in viewing figures of the remote meetings.
- 4.2 A presentation of the up to date attendance figures compared to historical figures will be brought to the Scrutiny Co-ordination Meeting for discussion.

5. TRAINING

- 5.1 Following the request at the last Scrutiny Co-ordination meeting, external training (via video meeting) is being arranged for the 5 Scrutiny Chairs on how to chair a Scrutiny meeting remotely. Several dates are in the process of being obtained and circulated to Members for agreement.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 To note the report and confirm whether the committee would like a similar report going to CRMG Scrutiny Committee.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

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