

VENUE FOR SCRUTINY MEETINGS

Report of the Strategic Head of Service & Monitoring Officer (Legal and Democratic Governance)

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1. The Chairs of the scrutiny committees have requested a report be brought to the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee to consider the way forward in relation to the venue of Scrutiny Committees.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. As part of the response to the coronavirus pandemic, the government introduced regulations under Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 to make provision for local authorities to hold meetings remotely.
- 2.2. As a consequence, the Council was able to continue to transact business by means of holding approximately 240 remote meetings between 26 May 2020 and 6 May 2021, including some 59 meetings of scrutiny committees.
- 2.3. However, these regulations were subject to a sunset clause which meant that meetings of committees could no longer proceed remotely with effect from 7 May 2021.
- 2.4. A national consultation in relation to remote meetings has recently been undertaken and it remains to be seen whether the government will proceed with legislation to allow committee meetings to be held online once again.
- 2.5. Notwithstanding the expiration of the regulations on 6 May 2021, England remained subject to significant level of restrictions that made the logistical arrangements for the conduct of face-to-face meetings extremely challenging.
- 2.6. The government's guidance for the safe use of council buildings recommended that public meetings held face-to-face should be subject to social distancing, proposed the implementation of mitigation measures such as screens or barriers and the wearing of face coverings in public places remained mandatory in some public places.
- 2.7. In this climate, many local authorities struggled to find venues that would be suitable or otherwise had the capacity to convene meetings that would be compliant with the guidance.

3. THE APPROACH POST 6 MAY 2021

- 3.1. The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) identified a number of ways in which local authorities may be able to mitigate against the issues they were facing and be able to continue to transact the necessary business of the Council. These included:

- finding alternative venues which can provide for in-person meetings in a way that complied with social distancing requirements;
- mandating a maximum number of attendees for certain meetings;
- limiting public attendance;
- use of emergency delegated powers to officers; and
- convening informal “meetings” of members remotely.

3.2. At that time, the rate of infections in Stockport was rising significantly and the Council had received a number of concerns from members in relation to being asked to return to face-to-face meetings within this context.

3.3. As a result, following consultation with Group Leaders and scrutiny chairs, it was agreed to proceed with the June round of scrutiny committees on a remote basis as informal ‘meetings of members’ of the respective scrutiny committees on the grounds that those meetings were not decision-making bodies and nor were they due to exercise any statutory functions. The Cabinet had further given an undertaking that all comments and recommendations that were made at any online remote Scrutiny meetings, would have the same weight attached to them by officers and Cabinet Members as if they were made by the formally convened face-to-face Scrutiny Committee meeting.

3.4. A number of additional extraordinary meetings of scrutiny committees were also held throughout June and July which were also conducted remotely.

3.5. In advance of the September round of scrutiny committees, further discussions were held with scrutiny chairs in relation to the conduct of those meetings. While it was acknowledged that the position in September was quite different to that in June as England had at this point emerged from most of the coronavirus restrictions, the advice from the Council’s Director of Public Health remained that public committee meetings should continue to be subject to social distancing and other suitable mitigation measures being put in place such as enhanced cleaning and a recommendation that face coverings be worn.

3.6. It was again agreed that in the light of the high level of infections locally and the fact that council officers had been asked to continue to work from home until the end September, it would be appropriate to hold those meetings remotely.

3.7. However, members requested that the Scrutiny Co-ordination Committee be given the opportunity to review the position at its next meeting and determine its approach to holding meetings going forward.

4. CONSIDERATIONS

4.1. Given the uptake in the vaccination and the relaxation of the rules on social distancing members have asked that consideration be given to holding scrutiny meetings in person going forward until a change in the law allows formal meetings to be held remotely once again (at which time the venue of Scrutiny Committee Meetings can be revisited). In the event such meetings did recommence in person the council’s health and safety officers would undertake a risk assessment of the proposed venue/room and would make recommendations as appropriate (e.g. on social distancing, cleaning and ventilation).

- 4.2. Many other authorities in GM and further afield continue to undertake scrutiny via an online forum due to coronavirus rates remaining high, due to the increased accessibility by being able to join online thereby saving travel time and in order to continue to contribute to the Green Agenda by not having to travel to meetings.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1. Members are asked to consider whether they wish Scrutiny Committee Meetings to return to physical face to face meetings and if so when and whether any criteria needs to be satisfied before such meetings re-commence face to face (such as the level of coronavirus rates, vaccination uptake rates and/or advice from the council's Director of Public Health).

BACKGROUND PAPERS

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Vicki Bates on telephone number Tel: 0161 474 3219 or alternatively email vicki.bates@stockport.gov.uk