

TITLE	Virtual Meeting Review
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Community and Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 2 September 2020
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Deputy Chief Executive - Graham Ebers

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Running virtual meetings has allowed for Wokingham Borough Council's (WBC's) schedule of meetings to run as close to the published version as possible. Virtual meetings have enabled the public to view the Council's decision making process, with the proceedings viewed in real time. The new arrangements continue to enable them to ask questions and make statements at relevant meetings.

Reviewing the progress made to date and any potential improvements, in addition to considering which meetings may in future be suitable for 'hybridisation' (a blend of virtual meeting using Microsoft Teams in conjunction with a physical meeting), will allow WBC to future proof the running of its schedule of meetings whilst ensuring that the public have a voice at public meetings in the most accessible way possible.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Committee:

- 1) Consider the report and offer practical suggestions on how virtual meetings may be improved in the future;
- 2) Note and provide any comments on the work that is being undertaken to run hybrid meetings in the future;
- 3) Continue to work alongside Democratic Services to enable effective Council meetings to be held.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The report details the options considered towards the beginning of the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic, the implementation of the options agreed upon, and the potential options as we consider moving towards hybridised meetings.

Background

1. Under the Local Government Act 1972 formal meetings of the Council had to comply with a number of rules which included any Member taking part in such a meeting having to be physically present at that meeting.
2. The national “lockdown” and social distancing measures arising from the C-19 pandemic meant that the Government had to consider alternative arrangements for the holding of local authority meetings. As a result Regulations were enacted, which took effect on 4 April 2020. These Regulations provided flexibility to local authorities in the manner in which they could hold such meetings, which included the ability for Members to attend remotely. These rules apply until 7 May 2021 (or earlier if agreed by Government).

3. Initial Options Considered - Holding Meetings

Prior to the Regulations being enacted Officers set about considering the most appropriate way for the Council’s decision making process to continue. The options that were considered at the time were as follows:

- **Cancel the schedule of meetings, and delegate key decisions to the Chief Executive or the appropriate Officer(s).** This option would have taken decision making away from Members and prohibit any public involvement in meetings of the Council. Another issue with this option was that full Council (or as a minimum, the Special Council Executive Committee) would be required to meet in order to allow such delegation of decision making. As meeting physically was no longer an option under the legislation and health guidance, the only way such a meeting could be held would be virtually. If WBC were able to hold a virtual meeting in order to delegate decisions, it was felt that time would be better spent finessing virtual meetings in some capacity which would enable decision making meetings to take place.
- **Run the schedule of meetings virtually, in a reduced capacity and with reduced agenda items and Committee Members.** This option would have meant that the schedule of meetings would have broadly taken place virtually. However it was likely that a number of non-decision making Committees would not have taken place. In addition, the agendas of those Committees due to take place would have had to be carefully controlled, and the number of Committee Members in attendance reduced, in order to ease the transition to a virtual meeting environment. This was the option adopted by a number of local authorities, as it still allowed key decisions to be made in a public setting whilst making management of such meetings easier. As Officers became more accustomed to the virtual meeting technology, it was felt that WBC could manage as close to a full schedule of meetings, with full committee membership, and full accompaniment of agenda items as would be expected during more normal times.
- **Run the schedule of meetings, in an almost full capacity.** This option was the most complicated, resource intensive, and time consuming of the three available choices. Officers were confident that this could be achieved with Member training on using the new technology and increased Democratic Services Officers’ support at meetings in order to deal with any technological issues that may arise,

and to livestream the meeting for public viewing. With hindsight, this option has proved to be both viable and successful, with meetings ranging from Scrutiny Committees to full Council having been held successfully held.

4. Video Conferencing Solutions Considered

Officers from IT, People and Organisational Development and Democratic Services worked together to find a solution to running virtual meetings. Discussions were also held with other local authorities to find out what solutions they were intending to use and any issues they had encountered. A number of software options were considered, primarily Microsoft Teams and Zoom. WBC already had a corporate contract in place with Microsoft, with a support package in place and with IT Officers in contact with Microsoft representatives. Microsoft Teams was therefore chosen as the preferred option, as it met the Council's needs and had the support of WBC's IT team. Support in using Teams has been offered to all Members and those Officers who are required to attend meetings of the Council. Being able to dial-in to meetings, using a telephone, has been a very useful aspect of Teams in situations when an internet connection was unavailable or becoming unreliable.

5. Livestreaming Options Considered

In order to make the virtual meetings publically viewable, a suitable solution needed to be devised in order to stream the proceedings in real time for public viewing. The following options were considered:

- **Use of 'Teams Live'**. This option was carefully considered by Democratic Services' and IT Officers, however upon explanation it was understood that using 'Teams Live' would make the flow of a meeting unnatural compared to that which Members, Officers and the public were used to. Those wishing to address the meeting would be placed in a queue system, which would then be managed by at least one 'producer'. This system would restrict the ability for quick follow up points, points of order, and the overall flow of the meeting. Although other Councils have used this method, and continue to do so, the differences in the flow and feel of a meeting as a result of using 'Teams Live' continues to make this option unappealing.
- **Use of Open Broadcasting Software (OBS)**. This option involves using the free and well renowned software known as OBS to capture a standard Teams call and livestream it directly to WBC's YouTube page. This solution involves an Officer's laptop screen capturing a standard Teams call whilst the meeting is underway. This allows for a meeting to be carried out in a similar way to a standard physical meeting, in terms of the flow of the meeting. One issue with this method is that any Team's text chat, notifications, or other interruptions within the application is also captured and livestreamed. This often means that a separate Officer is required to stream the meeting, or have all notifications turned off in order to provide a better viewing experience. The use of streaming technology also requires a reasonable and consistent internet speed, in excess of 2000Kbps upload speed. This requirement reduces the pool of Officers able to livestream, as a number of Officers have home internet speeds below this required amount. Despite this, OBS has proved to be reliable and consistent, and allows WBC to hold meetings in a similar vein to that of a physical meeting.

6. Achievements and Benefits to Date

The Executive on 22nd April 2020 was the first meeting to be held virtually and since that date the Council has continued to hold meetings, as far as possible, in accordance with the agreed Schedule of Meetings. To date 26 public meetings have been held virtually

Members of the public have continued to be able to ask questions at applicable Council meetings. With regard to Planning Committee meetings public participation has been to date through the submission of written statements. However, full public participation is expected to commence at Planning Committee meetings from September.

There have been other benefits as a consequence of holding virtual meetings:

- Councillors and members of the public do not have to travel to participate in meetings which meets the Council's climate emergency agenda;
- Members of the public who may otherwise have not been able to travel to the Council Offices to attend a meeting are now able to participate on-line;
- Since the introduction of virtual meetings all of the Council's public meetings have been live streamed and are available to be viewed after the meeting. This has increased the visibility of meetings and increased the numbers of people viewing the meetings. Live streaming also enables people to turn on the "captions" facility if required.

7. Way Forward - Hybrid Meetings

Moving forwards, hybridised meetings (i.e. some Members physically present, others on Microsoft Teams) may become possible to manage in a safe environment. This is dependent on a number of issues including up to date Government guidance and the maximum safe capacity of meeting rooms at Shute End.

Hybridised meetings would allow for a proportion of Members and Officers to be physically present in a meeting room, whilst simultaneously in communication with a set of Members and Officers in a virtual Teams meeting. In time, members of the public might also be able to physically attend the meeting in order to ask questions and make representations.

Hybrid meetings require a number of technological upgrades to the existing WBC audio-visual system in order to incorporate, record, and broadcast both the physical and virtual portions of the meeting. Consequently, an order has been placed with our contractor to carry out these upgrades.

Hybrid meetings can only reasonably be carried out in the Council Chamber currently, due to social distancing requirements. This means that the seating arrangements may be less than ideal, with some Members or Officers having their backs turned to other attendees. In addition, attendees will need to comply with Government guidance i.e. signing in and providing contact details, be especially mindful of social distancing, hand sanitisation and surface contact etc. Additional sanitisation, for example of physical microphone buttons, will be required before, during and after the hybrid meeting in order to keep all attendees safe. Full cleansing of the Council Chamber would be required before and after any hybrid meeting. Due to capacity issues any members of the public

would likely have to be kept in a separate meeting room until they were escorted into the Council Chamber to speak.

Hybrid meetings would also require a significant amount of Officer support. For example, Building Support Officers to manage the building, an Officer to clerk the meeting, an Officer to record and livestream the meeting (this would require a good technical knowledge of the system, as the Officer would likely have to switch between WBC’s main audio-visual feed and the Teams meeting feed), and an Officer to assist the public to move to and from waiting rooms. Additional Officers may be required over and above those mentioned above for more complex meetings.

A number of meetings could be considered for future hybridisation, including the Executive, Scrutiny, Planning and Licensing Committees. Hybrid meetings would also offer the opportunity to members of the public, who may be more comfortable with asking a question in person to do so, whilst also giving them the opportunity to continue asking their question virtually if that was their preference.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	See below	Yes	R
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	R
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	R

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

Virtual Meetings – a saving of £5,000 has so far been identified. This saving is due to less committee agendas being printed offset by the overtime that has been paid to the additional staff required to support virtual meetings; including the webcasting of such meetings. This saving will continue as long as meetings are held virtually.

Hybrid Meetings - The external costs identified for work that is required to the audio visual system in the Council Chamber, to enable the integration of that system with Microsoft Teams, is £3,850 (exc vat) plus £350pa ongoing support. In addition, there will be internal costs of staff time to support the project (IT, Democratic Services, Facilities) and overtime costs as additional staff will be needed in Shute End to service hybrid meetings with the public in attendance (compared to running virtual meetings). It is difficult to quantify the exact amount of support that will be required for hybrid meetings as this will vary from meeting to meeting depending on the complexity of the meeting and how many members of the public are in attendance. These staff costs should however be met from within existing budgets.

Cross-Council Implications

Virtual meetings allow key decisions from various Council departments to be made within the normal schedule of meetings

Public Sector Equality Duty
<p>WBC strives to make public meetings as accessible as possible for Members, Officers, and the public. Meetings are livestreamed and available to watch afterwards on YouTube. Those asking questions at public meetings are able to use a telephone, rather than an internet based 'voice over IP (VOIP)' solution, to participate in the meeting. In circumstances where neither a VOIP nor telephone based solution is possible for the member of the public, provisions can be made for a written statement to be read out on their behalf at a meeting. When safe and practical, WBC will welcome the public back to attend meetings in person.</p> <p>An initial Equality Impact Assessment was completed upon the initialisation of virtual meetings. The findings concluded that in three of the nine protected characteristic categories, there would be an overall low impact as a result of holding virtual meetings. In the other six categories, a 'no/neutral' impact was concluded.</p>

List of Background Papers
None

Contact Callum Wernham	Service Governance
Telephone No Tel: 0118 974 6059	Email callum.wernham@wokingham.gov.uk