

TITLE	Holding of Full Council Meetings and Remote Attendance
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Council on 22 July 2021
WARD	None specific
LEAD OFFICER	Andrew Moulton, Monitoring Officer

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To provide certainty to Members, Officers, and the public on the holding of Council meetings during the remainder of the 2021 calendar year.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- 1) agree that for the remainder of the calendar year, and subject to no objections being received from the Group Leaders in advance of the meetings, full Council will be held in the Council Chamber at Shute End in accordance with public health advice;
- 2) note in the case where an objection has been received that the Mayor expects the Leader of the Council to arrange meetings with the Group Leaders to discuss matters relating to the holding of the full Council meetings related to those objections; and
- 3) approves any deemed absence for the purposes of section 85 of the Local Government Act 1972 ('the 6 month attendance rule'), for any Member who has joined the meeting by remote means.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

A recent meeting was held with the Group Leaders, Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer on 12 July to agree the approach to the July Council meeting and an approach was agreed as follows. In accordance with current Covid-19 guidance 28 Members, politically balanced, can physically attend the July Council meeting with the remaining Members attending virtually via Teams. It is proposed that the deemed absence of those Members who join the meeting remotely is approved by Council for the purposes of s85 of the Local Government Act 1972 and that the 6 month period is reset and starts again for those Members

Given the changing guidance relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and the holding of meetings, the Mayor wishes Council to consider and agree how it meets after the summer providing as much certainty as possible in the circumstances.

The report proposes that for the remainder of the calendar year, Council meetings will be held in the Council Chamber at Shute End. The public health advice relating to social distancing, the Covid capacity of the Council Chamber and other health and safety measures that are relevant at the time will be taken into account before each meeting.

Background

Holding of Full Council Meetings

Since the expiry of the regulations in May 2021, which allowed Council meetings to be held virtually, there have been many discussions about how and where full Council meetings should take place including most recently on 12 July between Group Leaders, the Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer. Given the current Public Health and Government guidance relating to the pandemic and workspaces, it is not permissible for all 54 Members to attend full Council meetings in the Council Chamber.

Officers have looked at holding full Council meetings at outside venues but there have been issues finding a venue that would accommodate all Members in accordance with the relevant guidance whilst having the necessary IT and audio visual infrastructure in place that would ensure that Members and members of the public, who did not wish to attend in person, could attend remotely and also that the meeting could be webcast to an appropriate standard.

The Mayor wishes to provide some certainty over where full Council meetings should take place and is therefore proposing that for the remainder of the calendar year full Council will be held in the Council Chamber at Shute End in accordance with the public health advice that is relevant at the time, subject to there being no objections from Group Leaders. If any objection was to be raised, the Mayor expects the Leader of the Council to arrange meetings with the Group Leaders to discuss matters relating to the holding of the full Council meetings related to those objections.

Remote Attendance and the Six Month Rule

As stated previously a meeting by virtual or remote means is no longer possible due to expiry of the regulations on the 6 May 2021.

Group Leaders have agreed this meeting is conducted to balance the requirement for physical attendance in meetings against the ongoing public health risks.

This meeting will be held with 28 Members (being quorate) being in physical attendance in the Council Chamber at Shute End. The proportion of physical attendance represents the proportions across the full Council membership. Other Members are attending by remote means. Those attending remotely will be able to take part in the meeting i.e. ask questions and take part in any debate however only those in physical attendance are able to propose, second and vote on items. To overcome this, the political groups have agreed physical attendance that reflects their representation on the Council.

Section 85 of the Local Government Act 1972 is commonly referred to as the '6 month attendance rule'. This states that a Member shall cease to be a member if they are absent from attendance at meetings for a period of 6 months.

It is proposed that in respect of any Member who has joined the meeting by remote means, any deemed absence is approved by Council for the purposes of s85 and that the 6 month period is reset and starts again for those Members.

If a Member is attending via remote means (in that they are not one of the 28 Members in physical attendance), the Member must join the meeting using the Microsoft Teams meeting request sent by Democratic Services to be counted.

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)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

List of Background Papers

Local Government Act 1972

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