

HIGH PEAK BOROUGH COUNCIL

Corporate Select Committee

23 May 2022

TITLE:	In-Person/Remote Committee Meetings Update
EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR:	Councillor Barrow – Corporate Services and Finance
CONTACT OFFICER:	Linden Vernon – Head of Democratic Services
WARDS INVOLVED:	Non-Specific

1. Reason for the Report

- 1.1 The report provides an update to councillors on the conduct of online and in-person committee meetings.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the report be noted.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 As a result of restrictions put in place to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 it was not possible for council meetings to take place in person. In response the Government brought into force regulations that enabled local authorities to hold remote meetings. These expired on 7 May 2021 and the Government had concluded that it was not possible to bring forward emergency legislation to extend the original regulation.
- 3.2 The Council responded to a call for evidence launched by the Government on the use of virtual meeting arrangements to gather views on the question of whether there should be permanent arrangements for remote meetings and, if so, for which meetings. The Council supported the view that Council's should have the ability to determine if any of their meetings should be held remotely. This may include circumstances where adverse weather may otherwise mean that a meeting needs to be cancelled and that such circumstances should be governed by rules of procedure agreed by each council.

- 3.3 The Government has not yet formally responded to the call for evidence, however, it has repeated its previous view that any permanent change that allows remote meetings to take place would require changes to primary legislation.
- 3.4 Following the expiry of the regulations the Council has continued to conduct meetings where feasible in line with government guidance which helps to reduce costs and carbon emissions. This allows the Council to continue to stream such meetings to the public via its website to maximise accessibility.
- 3.5 At present the Council does not yet have the equipment required to conduct “hybrid” meetings which allow attendees to join and participate at committees both in person and online. In order to achieve this the Council could consider the use of a webcast system that would include the installation of cameras in meeting rooms which would then integrate with video and audio of attendees participating in the meeting online.
- 3.6 The Council is currently updating its microphone system used for meetings which was introduced in 2011. In order to future proof the system the specification includes a requirement to integrate to a webcast system should the Council wish to implement such technology.

4. **How this report links to Corporate Priorities**

- Ensure our future financial resilience can be financially sustainable whilst offering value for money.
- Ensure our services are readily available to all our residents in the appropriate channels and provided “right first time”.
- Use innovation, technology and partnership with others to help improve the efficiency of services, improve customer satisfaction and reduce our impact on the environment.

5. **Alternative Options**

- 5.1 As detailed in the report.

Mark Trillo

Executive Director (Governance and Commissioning)

Web Links and Background Papers

[Information Digest](#)
[Individual Executive Decision](#)
[LGA Survey - Impact of in-person council meetings](#)

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6. Detail

- 6.1 As a result of restrictions put in place to tackle the Coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 it was not possible for council meetings to take place in person. In response the Government brought into force regulations that enabled local authorities to hold remote meetings (The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (SI 2020/392), made under section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020).
- 6.2 These regulations applied to all local authorities in England and Wales, including parish and town councils. They specified that a 'meeting' of a local authority could lawfully take place online, with members 'in remote attendance' who can hear and be heard by, and if possible see and be seen by, other members.
- 6.3 An Information Digest was issued on 27 May 2021 that provided councillors with an overview on the use of remote or virtual meetings by the Council. This reported that financial savings of £12,000 had been achieved whilst utilising online meetings. This included a reduction of expenses claimed by councillors and associated room hire costs etc. Taking into account the typical mileage claimed by councillors each year (6,131 miles) this also equated to an annual reduction of 1.69 tonnes of CO2.
- 6.4 The Digest also reported that there had been a total of 1,931 views of HPBC committee meetings via the Council's YouTube channel since remote meetings started, with an average of 35 views per meeting. Meetings of Full Council attracted the most views on average (72 per meeting) followed by Development Control Committee (67 per meeting). Whilst meetings had been conducted remotely there had also been an increase in the number of non-committee members attending meetings indicating that remote meetings were also more accessible for councillors.
- 6.5 Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 only permitted regulations to apply to council meetings that took place before 7 May 2021, primary legislation would be needed to extend this ability. Luke Hall MP, the Minister of State for Local Growth and Local Government, wrote to council leaders on 25 March 2021 to confirm that the Government had concluded that it was not possible to bring forward emergency legislation to extend the original regulation. High Court proceedings were instituted last year by Lawyers in Local Government and the Association of Democratic Services Officers with regards to this view. The Court stated that it was for Parliament to change laws not the courts.
- 6.6 The Government launched a call for evidence on the use of virtual meeting arrangements to gather views on the question of whether there should be permanent arrangements for remote meetings and, if so, for which meetings. The Council formally responded to the call for evidence (response contained in the Individual Executive Decision issued 11 June 2021) which supported the view that Councils should have the ability to determine if any of their meetings should be held remotely. This may include circumstances where adverse weather may otherwise mean that a meeting needs to be cancelled and that

such circumstances should be governed by rules of procedure agreed by each council.

- 6.7 If any changes to legislation are made as a result of this call for evidence they would apply to England only. The Welsh Government passed the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 which came into force on 1 May and made express provision for Welsh local authorities to meet remotely. Scottish local authorities had express provision to meet remotely prior to the pandemic.
- 6.8 Between October and November 2021, the Local Government Association (LGA) conducted a survey of councils in England. The purpose of the survey was to gather information on the impact of in-person council meetings for statutory and decision-making meetings, and how this may affect councils in the short-to long-term. The survey asked about a range of topics including councillor attendance at meetings, public engagement, benefits and challenges, as well as costs incurred. Key findings of the survey included:
- Almost three-quarters of respondents (72 per cent) thought that councillor attendance was lower since returning to in-person meetings.
 - Almost three-quarters of respondents (73 per cent) thought that attendance by members of the public was lower since returning to in-person council meetings.
 - More than half of respondents (53 per cent) thought that engagement by members of the public with council meetings was lower since returning to in-person meetings.
- 6.9 A number of organisations have continued to lobby the Government for the re-introduction of remote meetings and campaigned to give councils the ability to decide what works best for them. The supporting bodies have included:
- The Local Government Association (LGA)
 - The Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO)
 - Lawyers in Local Government (LLG)
 - Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS)
 - National Association of Local Councils (NALC)
 - Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC)
- 6.10 A recent petition organised by ADSO and LLG that called on the government to create Parliamentary time to agree a change in the law to allow councils in England to meet remotely if they wish attracted nearly 11,000 signatures.
- 6.11 The Government has not yet formally responded to the call for evidence, however, Kemi Badenoch, Minister of State for Equalities and Levelling Up Communities wrote to ADSO in November 2021 and repeated the Government's previous statement that "any permanent change that allows remote meetings to take place would require changes to primary legislation, and such passage would depend on the agreement of Parliament and the timetabling and pressures of Parliamentary business."
- 6.12 In response to a question asked in the House of Commons on 24 January

2022 to allow parish councils to sit in virtual or hybrid format to increase and widen access and to help them work to the best of their ability the Secretary of State Michael Gove MP replied:

“If during the pandemic we had not allowed councils to meet virtually, not only would we have impaired the effective working of local government, but we would never have known about Jackie Weaver and the country would have been the poorer for it. I commend the work of parish councils and others. I am strongly in sympathy with the view that hybrid meetings should continue in order to ensure the maximum amount of efficiency. There is a case for saying that certain significant local authority meetings should occur with all councillors present, but I want to proceed with the maximum amount of consensus to reflect the maximum level of efficiency and in particular of sensitivity to those who serve in constituencies such as my hon. Friend’s, where the rurality and dispersed nature of representation are important.”

- 6.13 Following the expiry of the regulations the Council has continued to conduct meetings where feasible in line with government guidance which helps to reduce costs and carbon emissions. This allows the Council to continue to stream such meetings to the public via its website to maximise accessibility.
- 6.14 At present the Council does not yet have the equipment required to conduct “hybrid” meetings which allow attendees to join and participate at committees both in person and online. In order to achieve this the Council could consider the use of a webcast system that would include the installation of cameras in meeting rooms which would then integrate with video and audio of attendees participating in the meeting online. Such a system would offer a more robust system to broadcast council meetings, improve the integration of online meetings with the Council’s website and enhance the experience of viewers.
- 6.15 The Council is currently updating its microphone system used for meetings which was introduced in 2011. It is anticipated that the costs for this will be met from recent underspends in the service budget. In order to future proof the system the specification includes a requirement to integrate to a webcast system should the Council wish to implement such technology and take advantage of automatic camera control functionality. The new system is also likely to be wireless to maximise flexibility leading to much shorter set up times and potentially offer other additional functions such as electronic voting.