

## **HIGH PEAK BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

**15 June 2022**

<b>TITLE:</b>	<b>In-Person/Remote Committee Meetings Update</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE COUNCILLOR:</b>	<b>Councillor Paul Roberts – Leader</b>
<b>CONTACT OFFICER:</b>	<b>Linden Vernon – Head of Democratic Services</b>
<b>WARDS INVOLVED:</b>	<b>Non-Specific</b>

#### **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 concluded that it was not possible to bring forward emergency legislation to extend the original regulations.
- 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 remote and hybrid meetings where feasible in line with government guidance which helps to reduce costs and carbon emissions.
- 3.5 The Council is currently updating its microphone system which it is intended to integrate with the Authority's webcast system.
- 3.6 The County Council Network, in association with Zoom, has recently published a research report on the use of hybrid meetings. This indicates a significant desire by councillors to adopt a hybrid model for conducting council business which has the potential to improve the diversity of elected members in councils.

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

- Effective use of financial and other resources to ensure value for money
- Ensure our services are easily available to all our residents in the appropriate channels and provided "right first time"
- Effective use of ICT
- Meeting the challenges of climate change

#### 5. **Alternative Options**

- 5.1 As detailed in the report.

Mark Trillo

**Executive Director (Governance and Commissioning)**

#### **Web Links and Background Papers**

[Information Digest](#)  
[Cabinet Delegated Decision](#)  
[LGA Survey - Impact of in-person council meetings](#)  
[CCN – Hybrid Meetings report](#)

#### **Contact details**

Linden Vernon  
Head of Democratic Services  
Linden.vernon@staffs Moorlands.gov.uk  
01538 395613

#### 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 25 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 almost £11,000 per annum had been achieved whilst utilising online meetings. Taking into account the typical mileage claimed by councillors each year (8,466 miles) this also equated to an annual reduction of 2.12 tonnes of CO2.
- 6.4 The Digest also reported that there had been a total of 4,217 views of SMDC committee meetings via the Council's webcast system since remote meetings started, with an average of 80 views per meeting. Meetings of Planning Applications Committee (138 per meeting) followed by Full Council (110 per meeting) attracted the most views on average. 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 remotely or by using its hybrid system where feasible in line with government guidance which helps to reduce costs and carbon emissions.
- 6.14 The Council is currently updating its microphone and projection systems, the costs for which should be met from recent underspends in the service budget. In order to future proof the system the specification includes a requirement to integrate to the Council's webcast system and take advantage of automatic camera control functionality.
- 6.15 The County Council Network, in association with Zoom, has recently published a research report on the use of hybrid meetings. This is based on a survey completed by 479 county and unitary authority councillors representing 36 councils. The research indicates a significant desire by councillors to adopt a hybrid model for conducting council business with 87% of councillors agreeing that they would like their council to adopt hybrid meetings for statutory business in the future. Councillors said that using online meetings would provide the following benefits for them:
- help to manage time more effectively (67%)
  - make it easier to attend a wide range of meetings (54%)
  - reduce commuting time (61%)
  - reduce their carbon footprint (64%)
- 6.16 The research also found high levels of enthusiasm for hybrid meetings from groups traditionally underrepresented in local government including women, people with caring responsibilities, people with disabilities and younger people.