



CONSTITUTION AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE

24TH February 2021

REPORT TITLE:	Remote Meetings Update
REPORT OF:	Director of Law and Governance

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides the Committee with an update in respect to the implementation of the programme of remote Committee meetings since April 2020 in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic following the consideration of a report on this matter at the November 2020 meeting of the Committee.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Constitution and Standards Committee are requested to consider and comment on the report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The Committee are requested to comment on and offer any feedback in respect to the holding and conducting of remote meetings over the course of the last 10 months and to provide Members with the opportunity to share their views on the possibility of holding future meetings of the Council and its Committees by remote or hybrid means. This will be dependent on legislative change when the provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 in respect to the holding of meetings cease.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 This report is for information and consultation and therefore no other options have been considered.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3.1 Implementation of the Committee Programme

In spite of the additional demands and challenges placed on Members and Officers by virtue of the Covid-19 pandemic, a full programme of Committee meetings was embarked upon following the adoption of the new Constitution in September 2020 and prior to that, Regulatory Committees and selected other Committees continued to meet between April and September 2020 predominantly to consider planning and licensing matters.

A table of meetings which covers the period April 1st 2020 and 12th February 2021 is listed below:-

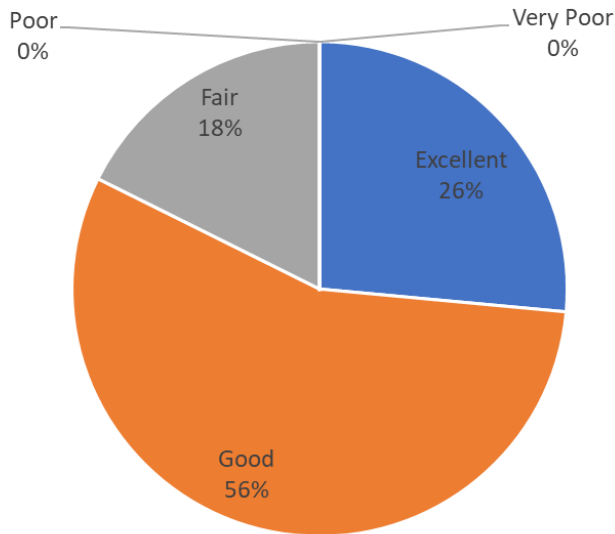
Meeting Type	Number Held
Council and Committee Meetings	85
Working Group/Task & Finish Group	22
Budget Workshops	22
Total	129

The figures above do not include the agenda setting meetings/briefings held for the Chair and Group Spokespersons. Members should also note that during the same period 446 individual Admission Appeals were held by remote means enabling parents to meet and have their cases heard by the Independent Appeals Panel.

3.2 Member Survey

To help inform the Committee's discussions on the holding of Remote Meetings, a survey of all Members of the Council was undertaken to ascertain each individual experience during the past year and to seek views on the future running of Committee Meetings. The full survey results are attached at Appendix 1 to the report, however a summary of the outcomes are listed below. 34 Members responded to the survey which equates to a 54% response rate.

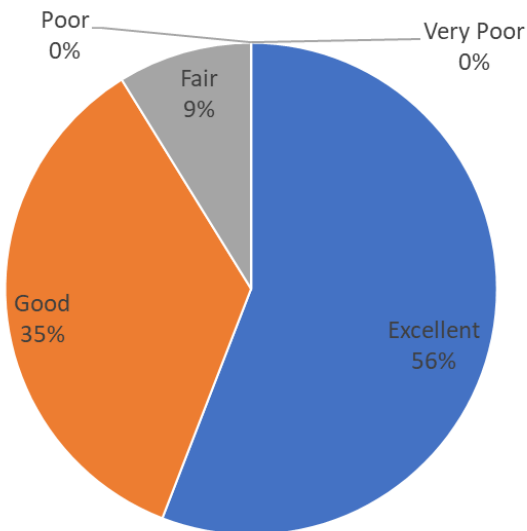
How Would You rate your experience of attending remote committee meetings?



The majority of responses from Members were positive. Further training opportunities on the use of Teams beyond a beginner level will be actioned as well further training for Committee Chairs on using multiple screens.

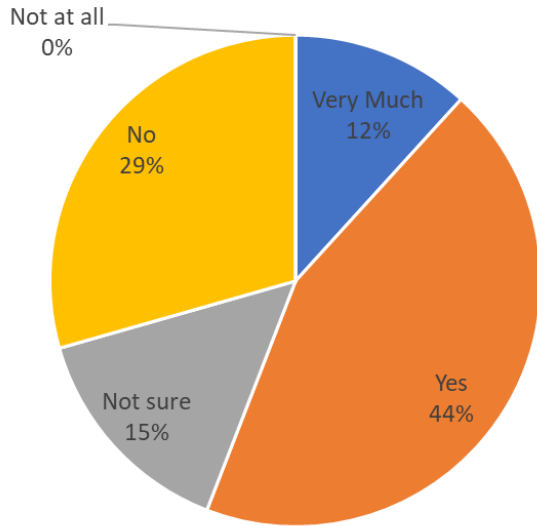
The use of Teams and training on the Remote Meeting Protocol will form part of the New Member Induction process.

Do you feel that IT officer support for remote meetings has been:



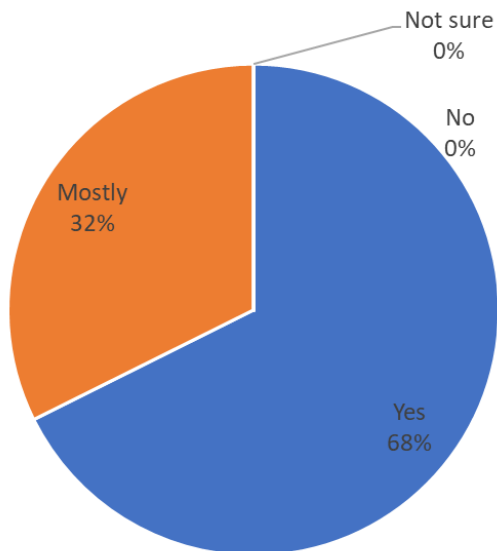
Responses were extremely positive. Reflects well on the training and support provided by IT and Democratic Services Officers to enable Members to participate and adapt quickly to the new ways of working.

Do you feel that remote meetings allow the same level of debate and discourse as meetings held in person?



Whilst concerns were raised in respect to connectivity and the potential loss of Broadband connectivity, on the whole Members felt able to participate fully. There was a difference of opinion to some degree with some Members feeling Remote Meetings were an efficient way of running meetings whilst a comment was made that there were too many meetings and they took too long. On the whole – meetings were well structured.

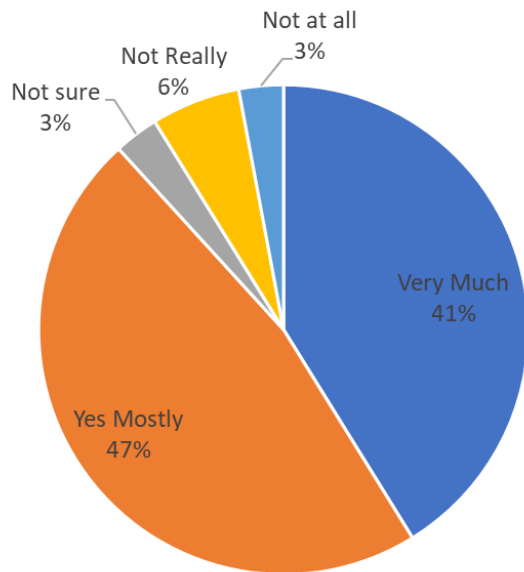
On the whole, do you feel that you have been able to participate fully in remote meetings and express your views and opinions?



Responses to this question highlighted the important role played by the Chair in conducting a successful remote meeting as well as the support provided by the Legal and Democratic Services Officers.

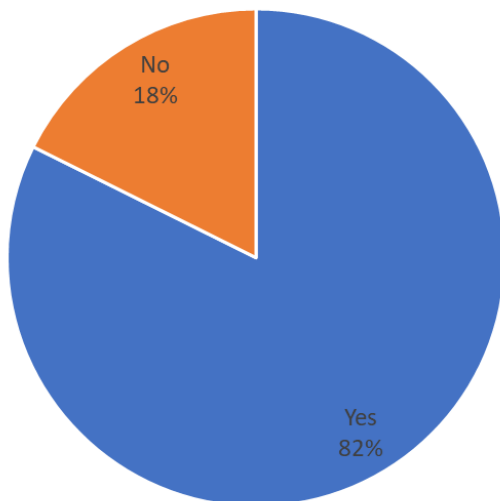
Full participation of the public was also raised as a concern.

Do you believe that the meeting protocols used for remote Committee meetings have worked well?



The need to be very clear with the public about how they can participate was also raised in response to this question. The mechanism by which Members of the public can participate is kept under review and any lessons learnt from individual meetings taken into consideration.

Do you have all the equipment necessary to continue comfortably with remote meetings?



Comments will be fed through the Member Development and Learning Group. Any individual requests can be fed via the Group Officer Managers.

A comprehensive list of the comments received are included in the Appendix to the report for Members to give consideration to. In the broadest terms, the consensus appears to be that Remote Meetings have been successful, but they do present a difficult challenge for the Chair especially for long or potentially contentious meetings such as the Council Meetings.

3.3 Future Meetings

Issues relating to legislative change and the parameters within which meetings can be held post-May 2021 are covered in section 5 of the report. Planning is underway in order to prepare for a number of possible outcomes including a return to meetings in person, the continuation of remote meetings or a combination of the two. Two Council venues which are both currently open and have been assessed as COVID being the Floral Pavilion and Birkenhead Town Hall both of which are viable options for running meetings in person or a hybrid meeting approach. The Floral Pavillion's capacity has been assessed and can accommodate 100 people. Birkenhead Town Hall Council Chamber can accommodate 20-25 people depending on table set up and the Assembly Room 50 people.

Democratic Services Officers and IT Officers are in the process of undertaking site visits to ensure that there is the required infrastructure to webcast any meetings held in either venue. The Head of Democratic & Member Services will provide regular updates to the Governance Working Group representatives.

The Council can only facilitate public meetings were legislation and Public Health guidance allows and any buildings operating to service Member, Officer or public meetings must be Covid-Secure. Subject to legislation, the Council could operate such meetings from the Floral Pavilion and Birkenhead Town Hall, both of which are Covid-secure and meet current guidance relating to working safely during Coronavirus. An assessment of safe capacity has been undertaken at the Floral Pavilion and Birkenhead Town Hall, and has identified that Full Council meetings can be accommodated at the Floral Pavilion with the support of Officers and can include a public gallery should legislation and guidance allow. Smaller meetings such as Committee meetings could also operate from Birkenhead Town Hall in the Chamber or Assembly Rooms.

Democratic Services Officers and IT Officers are in the process of undertaking site visits to ensure that there is the required infrastructure to webcast any meetings held in either venue. Work is also underway to understand the feasibility and technical requirements to facilitate hybrid meetings should legislation allow and should such arrangements be agreeable. The Head of Democratic & Member Services will provide regular updates to the Governance Working Group representatives.

4.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 There may be a need for additional financial investment in respect to IT provision and webcasting equipment which will be affected by a number of factors which are not yet known. These include but are not limited to:-

- What is and isn't permitted in legislation
- The venue for the holding of meetings/hybrid meetings
- Each individual Members' personal preference/requirements

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Section 78 of the Coronavirus 2020 Act relates to the holding of Local Authority meetings. The regulations make a number of provisions including the times at or by which, periods within which, or frequency with which, local authority meetings are to be held. Additionally, the places at which local authority meetings are to be held, the manner in which persons may attend, speak at, vote in, or otherwise participate in, local authority meetings, public admission and access to local authority meetings, the places at which, and manner in which, documents relating to local authority meetings are to be open to inspection by, or otherwise available to, members of the public.
- 5.2 The provision which may be made by virtue of subsection (1)(d) of Section 78 included a particular provision for persons to attend, speak at, vote in, or otherwise participate in, local authority meetings without all of the persons, or without any of the persons, being together in the same place. This provision has guided the holding of remote meetings and informed the Remote Meeting Procedure Rules adopted by the Council in July 2020. It should be noted that the regulations make provision only in relation to local authority meetings required to be held, or held, before 7 May 2021.
- 5.3 The Committee may wish to note that the professional bodies for Local Government Lawyers and Democratic Services (LLG and ADSO) have been in discussion with the Government and have formed the view that there may be potential scope for the Government to issue secondary legislation to permit remote meetings under existing powers. LLG & ADSO instructed senior counsel to provide an opinion on this matter and following the receipt of that advice, ADSO and LLG issued a joint statement on the 5th February 2021 that they will now prepare to seek a declaration from the courts that the pre-existing legislation governing local authority meetings under Schedule 12 of the 1972 Act, and meetings of an executive or a committee of an executive under the 2012 Regulations, can be held remotely in the way that has been specifically authorised by the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 There are no risks arising from this report.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The cross-party Governance Working Group have discussed the holding and running of Remote Meetings on numerous occasions and all Members have been consulted as outlined at Appendix 1.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 There are no equality implications arising from this report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no direct environment or climate implications arising from this report.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Members Survey

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Constitution
Coronavirus Act 2020
Local Government Act 1999
Local Government Devolution Act 2016

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date