

Report to: Governance Committee

Date of meeting: 2 October 2020

By: Assistant Chief Executive

Title: Notice of Motion – Virtual meetings after May 2021

Purpose: To consider a Notice of Motion from Councillor Field seeking agreement to ask the Government to allow local councils to decide whether to continue with virtual meetings for some or all meetings when the temporary national regulations cease in May 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Committee is recommended to consider the Notice of Motion as set out in paragraph 1.1 and make a recommendation to the County Council.

1 Background Information

1.1. The following Notice of Motion has been submitted by Councillor Field:

Since lockdown remote working has been shown to be a very effective way for the Council to conduct its business. Without specific permission from the Government to continue in this way we shall have to revert to face to face meetings after the next County Council elections.

This Council resolves to ask Central Government to change the rules to enable Local Authorities to make their own decisions as to whether to hold virtual or physical meetings from May 2021.

1.2. In line with County Council practice, the matter has been referred by the Chairman to the Governance Committee for consideration to provide information and inform debate on the Motion. The Committee's recommendation on this Notice of Motion will be reported to the Council at its meeting on 13 October 2020.

2 Supporting Information

2.1 The current situation with regard to Coronavirus has led to widespread disruption to social and business activities, including Council meetings. In light of Government guidance on social distancing the holding of physical meetings at County Hall has been suspended since March. The temporary national regulations enacted in April 2020 to allow Council meetings to be held virtually remain in force until 7 May 2021 (the day after the scheduled date for local government elections). Unless the temporary regulations are extended, or replaced with similar permanent legislation, it will not be legally permissible in most cases for Members to attend formal meetings remotely from 8 May 2021 (there is more flexibility in relation to Executive – Cabinet and Lead Member – meetings).

2.2 In Wales, permanent legislation is already in place to enable a level of remote attendance by Members via video conferencing. The Welsh statutory guidance on remote attendance indicates that this was intended to make it easier for those who, for instance, may have to travel long distances, those with domestic responsibilities and those in employment to attend. Meetings can only take place remotely if not prohibited by the local authority's standing orders/rules of procedure. It is therefore up to each local authority to decide whether it wishes to make remote attendance available. However, the Welsh legislation does, in normal circumstances, require a minimum of 30% of those eligible to attend to be present at the main meeting place (this has been amended during coronavirus restrictions).

2.3 Members have adapted impressively to virtual meetings, embracing both the technology and the different procedures and etiquette involved in holding meetings in this way. The public have remote

access to all public formal meetings via a webcast. From a practical point of view virtual meetings are running smoothly on Microsoft Teams.

2.4 Members have been invited to provide feedback on their experiences of virtual meetings and this informed a recent review of the arrangements by the Member ICT and Development Reference Group. Overall, the Reference Group was very positive about virtual meetings and the way they are running. The benefits of reduced travel in terms of carbon emissions, time and cost savings were also welcomed. Member feedback indicated that the larger meetings - full Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees – are viewed as less suited to the virtual format due to the nature of discussion and debate amongst larger numbers of attendees and the length of meeting. Some Members have found the technology and interaction with others via a screen to be challenging, and the loss of informal networking at County Hall outside of the meetings themselves was also noted. However, feedback also indicated that some Members wish to continue meeting remotely longer-term, especially for certain meetings which are seen as well suited to the format. These are generally the shorter meetings with fewer attendees where the benefits of reduced travel and greater flexibility are particularly apparent, and the meeting format adapts well to a video conferencing approach.

3 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

3.1. The Notice of Motion to the County Council is to ask the Government to allow local authorities to make their own decisions in relation to the ability to hold virtual meetings after May 2021. There are a number of benefits to virtual meetings including a reduction in travel time, costs and emissions and greater flexibility with diary management (which may be of particular benefit to councillors who work or have caring responsibilities). However, virtual meetings are also reported to result in a loss of informal contact with other councillors and officers and require additional support in relation to the technology and related issues. It is likely, therefore, that if remote attendance was to be allowed on a permanent basis, the Council would wish to have flexibility to choose whether and how to make use of this provision in order to best meet the Council and Members' needs.

3.2. The Committee is recommended to consider the Notice of Motion as set out in paragraph 1.1 and make a recommendation to the County Council.

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None