NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

22 June 2022

North Ayrshire Council

Title:	**Hybrid Meetings of the Council/Committees**
Purpose:	To invite the Council to consider the format of meetings of Council and its committees and future arrangements for holding meetings including webcasting/live-streaming.
Recommendation:	That the Council agrees: (a) that, going forward, all meetings of the Council and its committees should take place on a 'hybrid' basis as a matter of course, and the basic protocols which should apply to ensure their smooth operation; and (b) to note that officers are working to identify a cost-effective, fully integrated solution to accommodate the Council's future hybrid meeting and live-streaming/webcasting requirements

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report highlights the current default position in terms of the format of meetings of the Council and its committees. It acknowledges the demand for a more flexible approach in relation to hybrid meetings and invites Members to consider whether all Council and Committee meetings should be "hybrid" by default and how this might work in practice.

1.2 The report invites Members to note the work being undertaken to identify a cost-effective, fully integrated solution to accommodate the Council's needs with regard to physical, hybrid and remote meetings and associated webcasting/live-streaming.

2. Background

Meeting Formats

2.1 The default position, in terms of the Council's Standing Orders, is that meetings of the Council and its committees take place in the Council Chambers. Following the removal of COVID-19 restrictions, there has, therefore, been a return to predominantly 'physical' meetings since the start of the current Administration.

2.2   As previously agreed by the Council (and as provided for within Standing Orders), the option remains for individual meetings to be held on a wholly 'remote' or 'hybrid' basis (with a combination of physical and remote attendees).

2.3   In terms of Standing Order 2.1, the decision on whether an alternative format is "necessary" for any individual meeting rests with the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Provost (or Chair, as appropriate). Thus far, it has been possible to accommodate any requests for remote attendance.

2.4   It is now considered that in future, having "hybrid" meetings as the default position would enable greater flexibility in participation of meetings subject to the necessary technology and protocols being put in place. The Council is asked to take a view on this.

Webcasting and Live-Streaming

2.5   In 2017, the Council had cameras and a webcasting system added to the existing audio system and screens in the Council Chambers and began to webcast first meetings of the full Council and later also the Cabinet and Integration Joint Board. This meant that, in addition to the required public gallery provision in the Chambers, the press and public could view the proceedings live on the internet and also access a recording after the event.

2.6   During the COVID-19 pandemic, arrangements were quickly made to switch to wholly remote meetings. Microsoft Teams was used as the platform rather than the webcasting provider's own remote platform as Teams was considered to be both reliable and familiar to users. This was achieved by linking the remote Microsoft Teams meeting to the existing webcasting microsite using a separate piece of software.

2.7   The Council also had its existing webcasting provider install hybrid equipment in the Council Chambers. The system links Microsoft Teams (or the provider's own remote platform) to the existing webcasting and separate audio system in the Council Chambers. Technical issues have recently been experienced regarding how the various components of the system interlink.

2.8   The webcasting system in place is itself relatively sophisticated and designed for Council/committee meetings to allow the recording to be linked to individual Agenda items and it allows for speakers in the Chambers to be identified. However, the solution currently comprises individual components, from separate providers and is not currently a fully integrated, corporate system. Officers are, therefore, working to identify a reliable, fully-integrated system to meet the Council's future meeting/webcasting/live-streaming needs.

2.9   The assessment of future options will be informed by a number of factors, including cost, staffing resource and the relative weight attached to features such as:

   • reliability/ease of remote attendance by Elected Members versus
   • the ability to webcast wholly physical meetings in addition to live-streaming remote/hybrid meetings

2.10   Currently, there is an expectation that even meetings with a physical public gallery will also be webcast and, therefore, the emphasis will be on identifying a system which fulfils this requirement.

<u>Protocol for Hybrid meetings</u>

2.11 It must be recognised that no hybrid meeting system is infallible. Therefore, it is helpful if a protocol is in place to take account of potential system failure which may impact on loss of a quorum, officer contributions or input from external parties/hearing participants), and to ensure that, as far as possible, contingency arrangements are clear and consistent.

2.12 It is suggested that a protocol is developed which would include the following in the for hybrid meetings;

- a quorum of Members (including the Chair) would require to be present in Chambers.
- all officers would attend the meeting in person to present reports to the meeting and provide advice thus ensuring that they would be less likely to experience system failure from either internet providers or the hybrid system itself.
- in the event of failure of the hybrid system, the meeting would revert to a physical meeting in Chambers and those attending remotely would not be able to participate and vote.
- if a physical quorum is not present, a short recess would be called to enable the establishment of a fully remote meeting if possible.
- if it is not possible to establish a fully remote meeting, the meeting would be adjourned until another date.

3.   Proposals

3.1   The Council is invited:

(a)   that, going forward, all meetings of the Council and its committees should take place on a 'hybrid' basis as a matter of course, and the basic protocols which should apply to ensure their smooth operation; and

(c)   to note that officers are working to identify a cost-effective, fully integrated solution to accommodate the Council's future hybrid meeting and live-streaming/webcasting requirements

4.   Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

4.1   There will be cost implications for establishing an upgraded and integrated hybrid meeting system and employing additional staff resource. These will be met from projected savings generated from operating our new working practices.

Human Resources

4.2   Additional staff resource (one full time post) is required to facilitate the operation of remote and hybrid meetings.

Legal

4.3   A fully integrated and reliable system to facilitate remote and hybrid meetings is essential to ensure compliance with statutory obligations.

Equality/Socio-economic

4.4   None arising from the recommendations of this report.

Climate Change and Carbon

4.5   The ability to have hybrid meetings thereby reducing travel to physical meetings will make a positive contribution to reducing the Council's carbon footprint.

Key Priorities

4.6   The proposals support the priority of "A Council for the Future'.

Community Wealth Building

4.7   No implications from this report.

5.   Consultation

5.1   No formal consultation has been undertaken.

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For further information please contact **Melanie Anderson, Senior Manager (Committee and Member Services),** on **01294 324131**

Background Papers

N/A