



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	<b>Council: Wednesday 28 April 2021</b>
Report Number	<b>Agenda Item No. 8</b>
Subject	<b>Future of Council Meetings</b>
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Councillor Michele Mead, Leader of the Council Email: michele.mead@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Claire Hughes – Business Manager (Corporate Responsibility) Tel: 01594 812515; Email: claire.hughes@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	A report seeking direction from Council on whether some or all meetings should continue to be held via video conferencing, should the law allow such after 7 May 2021.
Annexes	None
Recommendation	That Council considers the report and determines how it wishes to proceed.
Corporate priorities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Working with communities to meet the current and future needs and aspirations of residents</li><li>2. To provide efficient and value for money services, whilst delivering quality front line services</li></ol>
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	N/A

## **1. BACKGROUND**

- 1.1. Luke Hall MP the Minister of State for Regional Growth and Local Government has written to all Council Leaders in England to say that the Government will not be extending the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (the Regulations) which make provision for virtual meetings because that would require primary legislation
- 1.2. In light of this announcement, the Regulations cannot apply to meetings after 7 May 2021 and as such there will be a requirement to return to physical meetings after that date.
- 1.3. However, the Association of Democratic Services Officers and Lawyers in Local Government, along with Hertfordshire County Council, have issued a claim in the High Court to ask for a declaration of lawfulness to allow for the continuation of local authority remote meetings beyond 7 May 2021. The basis of the claim is that the legislation already allows for remote meetings. That application has been accepted by the Court and expedited and will be heard on 21 April 2021.
- 1.4. The position is therefore that whilst we may be able to continue with virtual meetings this is unknown and as such we are taking steps to ensure that plans are in place to hold meetings face to face if required.
- 1.5. Whilst the continuation of virtual meetings would be beneficial, at least whilst social distancing measures are in place, it is a matter for Council to determine whether or not (if the declaration is granted) they would want this practice to continue. The purpose of this report is therefore to set out some options for consideration. However, if the declaration is not granted then this report will be surplus to requirements as the Council will, by law, be required to return to face to face meetings. Obviously, Council will be advised of the outcome.

## **2. CONTINUATION OF VIRTUAL MEETINGS**

- 2.1 The use of technology to hold virtual meetings has been largely successful, and whilst there have been some technical difficulties, in the main meetings have been effective , facilitated public engagement and most importantly enabled decision making to continue. In addition there have been the associated benefits of time and cost savings particularly in relation to travel.
- 2.2 If on 21 April, the High Court grants a declaration, then the Council will find itself in a position where it has the option to continue with virtual meetings and Council are asked to consider whether this is an option they would like to pursue.

## **3. FACE TO FACE MEETINGS**

- 3.1 If the declaration is not granted on 21 April then the Council will have no option other than to revert to face to face meetings. However, even if it is granted the Council could still opt to return to face to face meetings if that was its wish.
- 3.2 The continuation of social distancing measures does create some difficulties with facilitating face to face meetings but these can be overcome in a variety of ways. For smaller meetings the Council Chamber could be utilised but would require appropriate measures to be put into place, e.g. screens between seats and the use of PPE. However, for larger meetings such as the AGM the meeting would need to be held at an alternative premises. Discussions are currently ongoing with the leisure

centre to see whether they can accommodate this and with a separate company regarding the provision of sound and videoing equipment.

#### **4. MIX OF VIRTUAL AND FACE TO FACE**

4.1 If the declaration is granted and the continuation of virtual meetings permissible, Council may also wish to consider the option of continuing with some of its meetings virtually, whilst returning others to face to face. For example Council could decide that Full Council is held face to face and that all other meetings remain virtual.

4.2 The officer's view is that meetings where public interest is usually higher are better suited to a virtual environment as the use of technology enables greater accessibility and provides more option for people to take an active role e.g. in planning or licensing committees. Other committees which may be appropriate to continue in a virtual capacity could include scrutiny committees. For Full Council meetings, the level of public attendance is not generally high, but social distancing requirements present challenges in trying to accommodate up to 49 councillors plus staff and the public.

#### **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1. Unknown at this stage

#### **6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1. As detailed in this report

#### **7. RISK ASSESSMENT**

7.1. There are no immediate risks considered to be arising from the contents of this report.

#### **8. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

8.1. The use of virtual meetings has enabled more people to engage in and understand local politics. However, there is some evidence that some groups may find a virtual environment more challenging.

#### **9. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1. The continuation of virtual meetings will see the continued reduction in carbon emission associated with travel.

#### **10. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

10.1. Not applicable.

#### **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

11.1. There are no background papers relevant to this report.