

SUBJECT: Hybrid Meetings and Area Committees

MEETING: Democratic Services Committee

DATE: 15 March 2021

DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To provide the committee with an opportunity to debate the timescales and approach for hybrid meetings, re-starting Area Committees and the most effective format for these.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That members consider the meetings that should continue fully remotely and those which should operate as hybrid meetings, in the event that stay at home restrictions are lifted in the coming months.
- 2.2 To form a sub group of this committee to explore the most effective approach for Area Committees in future.

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 The Coronavirus has loomed large over the recent history of the county and the council. In March 2020, in common with all local authorities, our democratic functions were disrupted as we adjusted to new ways of working. The authority quickly re-established, firstly Cabinet, then Council, planning, licensing and select committees as remote meetings. We were able to draw on the expertise of a flexible and dedicated staff team who set up the technology, tested it and helped members learn to work in new ways – all within existing resources.
- 3.2 The Local Authorities Coronavirus (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations mean authorities are not required to make meetings open to the public during the pandemic. However openness is one of our core values and while physical attendance has not been possible due to the need to maintain social distancing and comply with stay at home restrictions, we have maintained our commitment to live streaming.
- 3.3 There have been a few teething problems, for example the limitations of the software mean we cannot operate a conventional public open forum at Select Committees while simultaneously broadcasting over YouTube, while workarounds have been needed at planning and licensing committee to enable contributions from applicants, again possible from the ingenuity of the staff team.
- 3.4 The Welsh Government review of Coronavirus Regulations taking place on 12th March presents a good opportunity for the committee to begin discussions about which meetings should continue remotely and which could operate as hybrid meetings when stay at home restrictions are eventually eased. We have to bear in mind that even when it becomes possible to travel for meetings, we will still be living with the virus and social distancing will place strict limits on the number of people who can be present in a meeting room. The committee could consult with all members to understand preferences and shape a plan for the future of meetings. This work can also be used to inform the upgrade of the audio-visual technology in the council chamber which is end-of-life and needs to be upgraded in 2021-22.

- 3.5 It has not been possible to re-start Area Committees for a number of reasons including limited officer capacity and problems ensuring the effective input of a wide range of participants over the Teams platform using a variety of technology. We have to remember that Area Committees are an opportunity to engage with town and community councils, local groups and individual citizens and businesses. Chairs of Area Committees highlighted the importance of being fully inclusive of town and community council representatives and members of the public.
- 3.6 Area Committees should be citizen focussed and able to influence at the interface between strategic and local decision-making ensuring that resources are directed to local priorities. The terms of reference include championing the area by raising issues of concern to residents, organisations and businesses with the County Council and other organisations, and influencing how services are delivered as well as spending plans for the area. They should also support the co-development of area-based plans and respond to the issues and needs identified in Monmouthshire's Well-being Assessment and other key policies.
- 3.7 There remains a strong appetite amongst county councillors for Area Committees to re-start and the committee chairs have a clear idea of the agendas they want their committees to look at. The coming months present an opportunity to look afresh at Area Committees. There are a number of reasons for this:
- The Local Government and Election (Wales) Act 2021 places a duty on the council to encourage participation in local government. This includes making it easier for people to make representation before and after decisions are made, publishing a participation strategy and having a petitions scheme.
 - We have different approaches to Area Committees following the pilot in North Monmouthshire. This committee affords voting rights to town and community councillors and is the sole mechanism for formal engagement in Abergavenny and surrounding communities. A discussion is needed about whether this arrangement is expanded to other committees, rolled back or whether we continue with different approaches in each area.
 - The strong and committed efforts of volunteers and community groups during the pandemic have again highlighted the extent and quality of social capital in the county and the enthusiasm people in the county have to make their communities a better place. Area Committees provide an opportunity to build on this and secure on-going citizen involvement in shaping the future of Monmouthshire as we grapple with complex decisions and choices as we emerge from the pandemic.
- 3.8 A sub-group of this committee could develop proposals and oversee a meeting of one Area Committee to test how our technology can work with contributions from external participants, including trailing on voice only inputs over phone lines and ensuring that the voting application can be used only those entitled to vote. The sub-group and pilot meeting could also test the feasibility of pre-recorded video contributions from members of the public on topics of interest and written contributions from people who are digitally excluded. The timing of this can be debated at the meeting but needs to factor in staffing capacity in the run up to the Senedd and Police and Crime Commissioner elections on 6 May.

4 OPTIONS APPRAISAL:

- 4.1 Options for the operation of meetings and the future shape of the Area Committee approach will be developed by the committee as this work progresses.

5. EVALUATION CRITERIA:

There are no specific evaluation criteria associated with this report. The Democratic Services Committee terms of reference enable to review the adequacy of resources required to discharge democratic services functions and make recommendations.

6. REASONS:

- 6.1 To ensure effective and efficient governance and engagement at a community level and an effective interface between local issues and strategic decision-making.

7 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 7.1 There are no direct financial costs associated with this paper. However, holding public meetings via video calling requires significantly more staffing time than a conventional meeting. The resource requirements are amplified when committees involve participants who are not on the local authority network since we experience issues of compatibility. In the coming months the same staff that support committees will also be working on delivering a Covid-secure Senedd and Police and Crime Commissioner elections.
- 7.2 Fully effective hybrid meetings will require the use of new technology. An amount has already been earmarked in the capital programme to replace equipment in the council chamber which is at the end of its life.

8. FUTURE GENERATIONS (EQUALITY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CORPORATE PARENTING) IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1 There are no specific implications identified as a result of this report. However the area committees are focused on ensuring effective involvement in local decision-making which makes a positive contribution to the ways of working outlined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act

9. AUTHOR:

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