REPORT TO: MORAY COUNCIL ON 29 JUNE 2022

SUBJECT: FUTURE COUNCIL MEETINGS

BY: DEPUTE CHIEF EXECUTIVE (EDUCATION COMMUNITIES AND ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT)

1.   REASON FOR REPORT

1.1   To invite the Council to consider how meetings are held, whether in person, remotely or a hybrid.

1.2   This report is submitted to the Council in terms of Section I of the Council's Scheme of Administration, a matter which is not delegated to a committee.

2.   RECOMMENDATION

2.1   It is recommended that the Council consider how Council and Committee meetings will be held going forward either:

   (i)   in person, requiring all members to be physically present; or

   (ii) remotely, continuing with virtual meetings online; or

   (iii) a hybrid of in person and remote.

2.2   If the hybrid meeting option (iii) is favoured then it is recommended that the Council approve the revised Virtual Meetings Guidance attached at Appendix 1.

3.   BACKGROUND

3.1   At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic the Council decided that all meetings would be held virtually. Whilst this presented some initial technical challenges virtual meetings which are webcast to the public now can be held relatively easily. A Virtual Meetings Protocol was agreed to help deal with some of the additional challenges which virtual meetings bring.

3.2   The Council Chamber has recently had work carried out to allow hybrid meetings to take place with:

   • Participants in the chamber and participants at home

- Simultaneous voting to be carried out

A number of meetings in this format have already taken place and the technology has proved successful.

3.3 The decision to hold meetings online has been reviewed several times with the latest council consideration of this issue on 15 September 2021 (para 32 of the minute refers) when it was agreed that meetings would continue to be held online.

3.4 There is a statutory requirement to allow public access to council and committee meetings:

- **In person meetings**. Public attendance must be allowed subject to public health considerations around numbers on people in the building.
- **Online meetings**. The public access requirement is satisfied by online meetings being webcast.
- **Hybrid meetings**. Although the statutory position is not entirely clear it is reasonable to expect public access to be given to the "in person" element in the Council chamber.

3.5 Given that most of the coronavirus public health restrictions have recently been lifted it is an appropriate time to review the Council's position. Options are set out below

4. PROPOSALS

4.1 Three options have been identified and the relative merits of each option are considered below:

Type of meeting	Pros	Cons
In Person	Best for person to person interaction Easier for break out discussions Lower risk of technical glitches Easy to monitor attendance and resolve voting issues.	Remaining public health risk Inefficient use of officer time for those who may only be required to address one report Transport time and cost for those attending from a distance.
Online	Proven technology Efficient use of time for those peripheral to the meeting who can continue to work from their desktop. Efficient use of time for	Risk of technical glitches Harder to Chair, and for officers to give timeous advice to the chair. Participants can miss out on

	those having to travel large distances (for example from neighbouring authorities) Benefit of the "hands raised" and "chat" functions Online meetings can be more accessible for those with a disability, with limited mobility or to help balance caring responsibilities.	nuances of timing and body language. Harder to monitor participants coming in and out of meeting. Break out discussions are harder. Public cannot see chat function (although Chair/clerk can read out anything relevant).
Hybrid	Potential Pros of both previous options – allows greater choice based on personal circumstances.	Potential Cons of both previous options. Additional clerking resource required. Additional risk that those attending remotely may feel they are missing out on the pros of being in person meetings detailed above*.

4.2   * The Council's Virtual Meetings Protocol has been updated to include additional measures to help with the smooth running of hybrid meetings. This Protocol is attached as **Appendix 1**. Changes to the previously approved Protocol are highlighted.

5   SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

(a)   Corporate Plan and 10 Year Plan (Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP))
No direct implications.

(b)   Policy and Legal
There is a statutory requirement to allow public access to Council meetings detailed in para 3.4 above. Coronavirus relaxations on this requirement have now been lifted however there are still public health considerations relating to safe use of public buildings.

(c)   Financial implications
Costs of additional technology required to hold hybrid meetings from the Council chamber have been met from government Covid funding.
There is potential for cost savings in councillor expenses from reduced travel requirements.

(d) Risk Implications
Outline in para 4.1 above.

(e) Staffing Implications
Online/hybrid meetings have potential for staff time to be used more efficiently.

(f) Property
None

(g) Equalities/Socio Economic Impact
Online meetings can be more accessible for those with limited mobility or to help balance caring responsibilities. Conversely they can provide additional challenges for those who have difficulty viewing screens for extended periods.

(h) Climate Change and Biodiversity Impacts
Allowing online access to meetings can reduced the number of car/public transport journeys which meeting participants are required to make.

(i) Consultations
Members of CMT have been consulted on a draft of this report and their comments incorporated.

5.   CONCLUSION

5.1   Councillors are asked to consider the format of future meetings: in person, online or a hybrid of both.

Author of Report: Alasdair McEachan, Head of Governance Strategy and Performance.
Background Papers:
Ref: