
PROPOSAL FOR BLENDED AND ONLINE COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Report by the Chief Executive

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

26 May 2022

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report proposes that, where the technology permits, formal meetings of Council will be held either in a blended way or wholly online. The purpose of this report is to give flexibility to Council, with Members being able to access meetings online using MS teams, or any alternative that is subsequently selected, or attending the meeting in person. The conduct of meetings in a blended way will be the default position. Meetings will only held fully in person if previously agreed with the Chair, and notified on the published committee agenda.**
- 1.2 Since April 2020 in response to the COVID pandemic, Scottish Borders Council has conducted formal committee meetings online by remote access. At its meeting on 26 March 2020, Council agreed to suspend formal meetings of the Council in a format whereby Members and officers previously gathered together in person, and to replace such formal face to face meetings with meetings held remotely using Microsoft Teams online technology. This step was taken to minimise the risk of infection from COVID19, with Council Standing Orders being amended accordingly. At its meeting on 30 July 2020, Council agreed that the holding of remote meetings would continue and this decision has not yet been formally revoked.
- 1.4 Officers, along with the Council's IT provider, CGI, have worked to identify the necessary technology to hold blended meetings. As a result of global shortages in IT equipment however that technology is only now in the process of being installed in the Council Chamber. It is proposed that, where the technology is available, blended meetings will going forward be the default and the norm for formal committee meetings. This will promote flexibility for both Members and officers, as well as helping to achieve our climate change ambitions of reducing carbon emissions, by reducing travel across the Borders. It will also make the best use of the technology currently available and will allow for the potential impact of any new or changing COVID or other restrictions moving forward.

- 1.5 Blended meetings can only currently take place in the Council Chamber. If meetings do not take place in the Council Chamber then full online meetings will be necessary due to the requirement to livestream proceedings for public viewing. In such circumstances meetings will then be held wholly online via Microsoft Teams, or any such alternative technology that may replace that in future. It is anticipated that committee meetings will only be called as wholly physical meetings with the approval of the Chair, and only normally where circumstances dictate that is the best option. This will be notified on the published agenda for the meeting in advance of the meeting being held.
- 1.6 Although the technology is now being installed in the Council Chamber, an interim continuation of meetings by remote access is still being proposed until full testing of the functionality and user awareness has been completed. During June, it is proposed to pilot and test the use of blended meetings and should this prove successful then meetings can move to blended meetings before the end of June 2022.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 I recommend that Scottish Borders Council agrees that:-

- (a) **once testing of the functionality of the technology in the Council Chamber has been completed successfully, that blended meetings of Council committees will become the default position;**
- (b) **in the event that blended meetings are not able to take place, then meetings will take place wholly online, and meetings will be called as physical meetings only where the Chair of the meeting agrees to this in advance of the agenda of the meeting being issued;**
- (c) **the following changes are made to Standing Orders to account for future blended meetings:**

Meetings of the Council

- (i) **Standing Order No. 8 – Addition “Where a meeting is being held in terms of Section 43 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 i.e. as a blended meeting, then public access to that meeting will either be in the meeting room with any Members present, or if no Members are present in a meeting room, or online through a livestream of the meeting.”;**

Duties of Chairman

- (ii) **Standing Order No. 16(b) – amend to read “ensuring that a fair opportunity is given to all Members to express their views on any item of business, whether they are present physically in a meeting room or through remote access, in accordance with the terms of the Standing Orders;**

(iii) Standing Order No. 16 – new addition (I) “taking reasonable steps to enable effective participation by Members, officers and members of the public whether they are present physically or by remote-access; failure of technology impacting on participation in a meeting by a Member may not necessarily require the meeting to be halted.”; and

Debate

(iv) Standing Order No. 30 – amend to “Every motion or amendment shall require to be moved and seconded, and, if required by the Chairman shall be in writing and shall be handed *or sent electronically* to the proper officer and read to the meeting...”

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Since April 2020 and in response to the COVID pandemic, Scottish Borders Council has conducted formal committee meetings by remote access, firstly through Webex and latterly Microsoft Teams. At its meeting on 26 March 2020, Scottish Borders Council recognised the need to take steps to reduce the risk to its Members, staff and residents of transmitting or contracting Coronavirus. It was therefore agreed to suspend formal meetings of the Council whereby Members and officers previously gathered together in person, and to replace such formal face to face meetings with meetings held remotely, with Standing Orders being amended accordingly.
- 3.2 A further report was considered by Council on 25 June 2020 which adapted Standing Orders to ensure they reflected the operational practice that had developed as a result of the experience gained in the operation of remote committees, with the technology now available to livestream meetings.
- 3.3 At its meeting on 30 July 2020, Council agreed that the holding of remote meetings should continue and a further report would be received from the Chief Executive in due course regarding the feasibility of using technology for holding blended meetings, whereby some Councillors would be able to join a meeting remotely, and the meeting itself could be livestreamed. That remit is discharged by this report. Officers, along with the Council's IT provider, CGI, have worked to identify the necessary technology to facilitate blended meetings.
- 3.4 At its meeting on 31 March 2022, Scottish Borders Council further agreed that public business of livestreamed Council committee meetings will be recorded and that recording will be available to view for 180 days after the meeting.

4 BLENDED AND ONLINE MEETINGS

- 4.1 Blended or hybrid meetings enable some or all Councillors to participate in meetings either by being physically present together in a meeting room or by taking part in the meeting online through remote MS Teams access. Standing Orders have already been amended to reflect the current operation of remote meetings using Microsoft Teams, with such meetings being livestreamed to the public from 10 August 2020. Further amendments are now needed to Standing Orders to reflect meetings being held as blended meetings. Section 43 of the Local Government in Scotland 2003 Act already allows for remote participation in formal Council committee meetings.
- 4.2 It is proposed that, where the technology is available, blended meetings will be the default and the norm for formal committee meetings. This will promote flexibility for both Members and officers, as well as helping alleviate avoidable vehicle journeys to and from meetings and possibility of reducing carbon emissions. It will also make the best use of the technology currently available and will allow for any future changing COVID or other restrictions. In effect, this will mean that those meetings being held in the Council Chamber at Council Headquarters will be capable of being held in a blended way. Such blended committee meetings, along with any wholly

online committee meetings being held via Microsoft Teams, will be livestreamed to the public and recorded. Where Elected Members are present in the Chamber, the public and press will also be allowed into the room to view the meeting. Should no Elected Members be present in the Chamber i.e. they are all accessing the meeting remotely, and if this meeting has been called as a blended meeting – appropriate arrangements will be made for the public and press to view the meeting, either online or in the Chamber.

- 4.3 Blended meetings can only currently take place in the Council Chamber. If meetings do not take place in the Council Chamber then full online meetings will be necessary due to the requirement to livestream. In such circumstances meetings will then be held wholly online via Microsoft Teams, or any such alternative technology may replace that in future. It is anticipated that committee meetings will only be called as wholly physical meetings where circumstances dictate that is the best option or where Members agree in advance of the agenda for such a meeting being called. Livestreaming and recording of committee meetings will happen whenever the facilities are available to do so, but their absence or a failure of technology will not themselves necessarily halt a meeting. In the same way, a failure of technology impacting on participation in a meeting by remote access will not necessarily halt a meeting.
- 4.4 Although the technology is now being installed in the Council Chamber, an interim continuation of meetings by remote access is still being proposed until full testing of the functionality and user awareness has been completed. During June, it is proposed to pilot and test the use of blended meetings and should this prove successful then meetings can move to blended meetings before the end of June.

5 AMENDMENTS TO STANDING ORDERS

- 5.1 The following changes are proposed to Standing Orders to take account of hybrid meetings:

Meetings of the Council

- (a) Standing Order No. 8 – Addition “*Where a meeting is being held in terms of Section 43 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 i.e. as a hybrid meeting, then public access to that meeting will either be in the meeting room with any Members present, or if no Members are present in a meeting room, or then online through a livestream of the meeting.*”

Duties of Chairman

- (b) Standing Order No. 16(b) – amend to read “ensuring that a fair opportunity is given to all members to express their views on any item of business, *whether they are present physically in a meeting room or through remote access*, in accordance with the terms of these Standing Orders
- (c) Standing Order No. 16 – new addition (l) “*taking reasonable steps to enable effective participation by Members, officers and members of the public whether they are present physically or by remote-access; failure*

of technology impacting on participation in a meeting by a Member may not necessarily require the meeting to be halted."

Debate

- (d) Standing Order No. 30 – amend to "Every motion or amendment shall require to be moved and seconded, and, if required by the Chairman shall be in writing and shall be handed *or sent electronically* to the proper officer and read to the meeting..."

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial

There are no costs attached to any of the recommendations contained in this report. The costs associated with the purchase and installation of the technology in the Council Chamber has been contained within existing budgets.

5.2 Risk and Mitigations

During and due to the pandemic the Council has conducted formal committee meetings wholly online via Microsoft Teams with meetings being livestreamed for the public. This use of technology has demonstrated that Council can conduct its business using appropriate online functionality, with Members, officers and the public able to access meetings without having to travel to Newtown St Boswells or other venues across the Borders. By recording Council meetings and making these available online for 180 days after the meeting, this will in turn broaden the transparency of Council business. Reverting wholly to physical meetings would likely be viewed as a retrograde step. The risk of failure of the technology is minimal, with very few Members and officers being unable to access meetings temporarily and on very few occasions for this reason over the last two years.

5.3 Integrated Impact Assessment

The Integrated Impact Assessment checklist completed for the Council report on 25 June 2020 entitled "Amendments to Standing Orders" still applies. It is felt that holding blended or wholly online meetings will allow members of the public greater opportunity to view the decision-making process of Council in operation either during a meeting via the livestream or by viewing a recording of a meeting.

5.4 Sustainable Development Goals

Having considered each of the UN Sustainable Goals, the impact on these is as follows:

- Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) – by holding blended or online meetings, women will be encouraged into elected office and to view/participate in the democratic process.
- Goal 10 (Reduce inequalities within and among countries) – it is anticipated that minority or under-represented groups may be more comfortable viewing meetings online or participating remotely in meetings.
- Goal 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts) – by holding blended or online meetings, the Council is

raising awareness of climate change at local level by reducing the need to travel for committee meetings.

- Goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels) – by livestreaming and recording committee meetings, Council will be increasing public access to information.

5.5 **Climate Change**

Holding blended or online meetings of the formal Council committees, will reduce Member and officer travel across the area and thus reduce unnecessary journeys and reduce carbon emissions.

5.6 **Rural Proofing**

Live streaming and recording blended and online meetings of formal Council committees will allow members of the public to view the Council's decision making process in operation either at the time or later, without the need to travel to a venue.

5.7 **Data Protection Impact Statement**

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

5.8 **Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

Changes are required to the Council's Standing Orders and these are detailed in the report. No changes are required to either the Scheme of Administration or the Scheme of Delegation as a result of the proposals in the report.

6 **CONSULTATION**

- 6.1 *The Director Finance & Corporate Governance, the Monitoring Officer/Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Director (People Performance & Change), and Corporate Communications are being consulted and any material comments received will be reported at the meeting.*

Approved by

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Title **Chief Executive**

Author(s)

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Background Papers: Nil

Previous Minute Reference: Scottish Borders Council, 20 July 2020

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Jenny Wilkinson can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

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