

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS COMMITTEE

23 JUNE 2020

COVID-19 MEETINGS ARRANGEMENTS: UPDATE AND PROPOSED CHANGES

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

ABSTRACT

This Report sets out proposed revisions to the interim arrangements that were agreed at the Special meeting of Angus Council on 3 April 2020, which will allow all members to be involved in the decision making of the Council.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Committee:

- (i) agrees that for the reasons set out in paragraph 4(b) of this Report, Council and Committee meetings be held remotely as outlined in that paragraph;
- (ii) agrees that these remote arrangements will be reviewed in six months time;
- (iii) notes that a remote meeting of full Council will take place on Wed 12 August 2020 at 2.00pm;
- (iv) notes that meetings of all service committees will resume in August 2020 in accordance with the previously agreed timetable of meetings, with the consequential ceasing of meetings of the Special Arrangements Committee and the Special Education Committee; and
- (v) notes that training will be provided to all elected members to facilitate this.

2. ALIGNMENT TO THE COUNCIL PLAN

This Report contributes to the achievement of our priority that the council is efficient and effective as detailed in our Council Plan for 2017 – 2022.

3. BACKGROUND

Members will be aware of the interim arrangements that were put in place following a special meeting of full Council on 3 April 2020, which included the establishment of two special Committees (Special Arrangements and Special Education). Report No121/20 refers.

These arrangements have been kept under review by officers. Taking account of the four Phases outlined in the Scottish Government Route Map, it is now anticipated that the current social distancing rules will be in place for the foreseeable future. This was not known when the interim arrangements were put in place by Council on 3 April. Since then, not only have officers developed expertise in the hosting of remote meetings but, more recently, the Council has improved its digital capability which will allow the roll out of a more appropriate and interactive meeting forum for Council and Committee meetings.

The proposals detailed in this report will enable the involvement in the political decision making of the Council again to all elected members.

4. PROPOSALS FOR COUNCIL/COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Officers identified 3 potential options; namely- (a) all members physically present (b) all Members attending remotely (c) an option for physical or remote attendance depending on individual member's circumstances.

Having given due consideration to these potential options, the conclusion is that only one of these options is viable and is recommended to members: for all members to attend meetings remotely and extend this to all Council/Committee meetings from August 2020 until such a time when Government determine physical distancing is no longer required. The reasons for arriving at this conclusion are detailed below.

(a) All members physically present - Not recommended

The Town and County Hall, where traditionally all Council meetings take place, is not a viable venue due to two main factors. Firstly, due to the layout and size of the Council Chambers, it would not be possible to comply with current social distancing rules. Secondly, the Council Chambers is currently closed as essential repair work is required to the balcony area. Examination of the extent of the works has not been possible and any works are not expected to be completed this year, 2020.

Other potential venues would need to be sufficiently large in size to be able to accommodate all elected members and officers for a full council meeting, along with any public and press, whilst all social distancing. Halls, such as the Reid Hall in Forfar has been discounted due to cost and resource implications. By way of explanation, the sound system in the Council Chambers is not portable and a sound system would need to be hired for every Council/Committee meeting. Previous costs for hiring a sound system when special Council meetings for major planning applications were held in Kirriemuir and Monifieth was circa £1,200 for each meeting. Secondly, there are the financial and staff resource required to set up the Reid Hall for public meetings in order to make it safe in terms of government guidelines. This may well include the installation of physical equipment as well as other health and safety measures. Also, staff resources would be necessary before, during and after the meetings and could be considerable. All of this is at a time when resources are being used to deal with a wide range of COVID-19 related matters.

It may be some elected members will be unable to participate in meetings in person due to Government guidelines restricting their movement which are in force and may change from time to time. This may unfairly restrict their involvement in the political decision making of the Council. Alternative arrangements would need to be put in place for these members in line with our obligations under the Equalities Act 2010.

It is also quite possible that any restrictions in relation to COVID 19 that may have been relaxed as part of a phased recovery plan will have to be reversed if circumstances require that response.

It is therefore suggested that for the reasons detailed above the option of having all elected members physically present in one place should not be taken forward at this time.

(b) All members remotely attending Council meetings- Recommended

Members will be aware that the Special Council meeting on 3 April was conducted remotely using the Zoom platform. These arrangements are now in place for meetings of the Special Arrangements Committee, the Special Education Committee, Development Standards Committee and the Scrutiny and Audit Committee.

Officers have looked at ways of refining the current arrangements and also at other platforms to improve the experience and potentially extend this to all Council (including service committee) meetings, thereby allowing all members to participate in the political decision making process.

The roll-out of Microsoft Office 365 across the Council offers as part of this software package "Microsoft Teams" which is a video interactive platform that can be used for conducting

meetings remotely and in a way that is more secure and interactive than the existing Zoom platform.

Appropriate training will be provided to all elected members to enable them to participate fully in a virtual Council or Committee meeting.

(c) Physical or remote attendance depending on individual member's circumstances – Not recommended

This option would be a hybrid of 1 and 2. For members who would be physically present then a suitable venue would need to be identified. Some meeting space is potentially available in Angus House, however this would need to comply with social distancing rules and staggered arrival and exit arrangements. It is also a building under review to ensure it can operate for staff who cannot work from home. Strict guidelines will be required for their safety and accommodation, limiting the numbers present in any one day. As well as resource implications in terms of staff and costs for physical equipment, it would mean that the maximum number of members, officers and press that could be accommodated would be very limited. They and all other members who could not or chose not to physically attend the meeting would require to attend the meeting remotely using Microsoft Teams.

This option, while giving members more of a choice as to how they participate in Council/Committee meetings, does have resource implications in setting up and conducting the meeting in a safe environment as well as deep cleaning the venue before and after the meeting. Also, a hybrid set up often means a poorer meeting experience for those who do not attend in person. It should also be borne in mind that due to social distancing measures, staff capacity in all Council buildings is significantly reduced and the use of office space to accommodate Council/Committee meetings would only reduce this capacity further. Accordingly, this is not recommended as a way forward.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Options a) and c) would incur additional costs which depending on the venue used could include the hire of a sound system, the costs of hiring a hall, officers' time and deep cleaning to set up and return- the venue for each meeting. By contrast Option b) incurs no additional costs if we use an existing software platform already being rolled out.

6. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

An Equalities Impact Assessment has been carried out and is attached as an Appendix to this Report.

NOTE: No background papers, as detailed by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to a material extent in preparing the above report.

REPORT AUTHOR: Donald Macaskill, Manager - Democratic and Members Services
EMAIL DETAILS: LEGDEM@angus.gov.uk