


REPORT TO

**BUDGET AND CORPORATE
SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY BOARD**

7th July 2020

Subject:	Update on Members ICT and Remote Committee Meetings
Cabinet Portfolio:	Cabinet Member for Resources
Director:	Surjit Tour Director of Law and Governance
Contribution towards Vision 2030:	
Contact Officer(s):	Democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk

DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That :

1. The Scrutiny Management Board consider the current position in relation to member ICT and remote committee meetings.

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide the scrutiny board with an update on the developing governance and member support arrangements.

2 IMPLICATIONS FOR VISION 2030

- 2.1 Effective governance arrangements support the delivery of the Council's Vision 2030.

3 BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 On 17th March, the Council's Resilience Manager, as the officer with responsibility for civil and emergency contingencies, recommended that the Emergency Committee provisions in the constitution should be enacted in light of the emerging Covid-19 situation.
- 3.2 The Emergency Committee membership is appointed by Council and is authorised to exercise council functions.
- 3.3 The Emergency Committee at their inaugural meeting on 18th March 2020 agreed temporary revisions to the key decision threshold, chief officer delegations, financial, procurement and contract procedure rules in order that the council was able to respond appropriately and safely. Where heightened officer delegations were introduced, advance consultation on any decision was undertaken with the relevant committee, for example, planning and licensing decisions, or the relevant Chair of Scrutiny board for executive functions. Statutory requirements for publication of decisions have been complied with. All decisions taken under delegated authority were reported through to Emergency Committee during public session, in line with the values of openness and transparency.
- 3.4 The Council introduced a weekly e-bulletin for Members to keep them apprised of emerging topics, the content of Emergency Committee agenda and up to date advice and guidance from partner and stakeholder organisations.
- 3.5 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 Remote Committee Regulations") came into force on 4th April 2020. This new legislation enables Councillors and members of the public to attend and participate in meetings using technological solutions. The legislation is currently intended to remain in place until the 7th May 2021.
- 3.6 The Council opted to utilise Microsoft software, MS Teams (Teams) to support remote committee activity. The software was initially trialled with members of the Emergency Committee with a wider roll out to Cabinet and Scrutiny Board Chairs.

4 THE CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Covid restrictions continue to be incrementally lifted nationally with the council responding accordingly. Following successful testing of MS Teams, the Emergency Committee at their meeting on 27th May agreed an interim calendar of committee meetings from June to September with the majority of committee meetings recommencing in July 2020. In

addition to the agreed programme, committee meetings including Ethical Standards, General Purposes and Audit and Risk Committees are being called in accordance with business need, with a full programme of meetings anticipated to be scheduled from September onwards. Agenda co-ordination meetings and committee briefings have been introduced as standard working practices

- 4.2 Engagement with members through the weekly e-bulletin will reduce as committee work programmes and regular all-member briefings hosted through Teams return the council's focus toward regular business activity.
- 4.3 Democratic and Member Services along with colleagues in ICT have been working to support the installation and testing of the Teams software with all remaining councillors so that they are able and confident in using the software functionality during meetings and other business related functions.
- 4.4 The support programme has been positively received and individual member needs have been identified and progressed. As with all new initiatives, the development and testing phase has highlighted a small number of issues to be addressed. Whilst the majority of members have reported positively on the implementation of remote committees, there are some who have advised of issues arising from device compatibility.
- 4.5 The Council currently has a hybrid scheme in place for the provision of computer equipment to Councillors. Members can opt to either utilise their personal computer equipment with security software applied or are issued with a corporately managed device to support them in their councillor role. An initial 17 members, since testing the remote committee software, have reported some limitations with existing devices which impact on connectivity into remote meetings. These include the age of devices along with challenges around accessing electronic papers during meetings. Having undertaken an assessment of member needs, a corporate provision of laptops has been agreed for those members who are encountering issues. This is currently being progressed with the ICT service contacting 7 members identified to agree the roll-out programme. The remaining 10 member accounts require some additional migration activity and for the limitation of any disruption these members are being contacted to agree a date for this work to be undertaken. The council will continue to review and address any additional upgrade requirements as they become identified.
- 4.6 Committee members experiencing any technical difficulties with accessing meetings through video conferencing can use the teleconferencing functionality within MS Teams to meet the minimum attendance requirements.

5 CONSULTATION (CUSTOMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS)

5.1 Elected members have been engaged in discussions around ICT needs.

6 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS.

6.1 There are no alternative options to be considered at this time.

7 STRATEGIC RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There will be a maximum anticipated cost of £35,000 for any procurement of additional devices. Where existing devices can be repurposed, this avenue is being explored to limit costs to the organisation.

8 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 These are outlined in paragraph 3.5 above.

9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

9.1 Where members have individual support needs in relation to attendance at remote meetings, these will be assessed and relevant arrangements implemented accordingly.

10 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

10.1 None associated with this report.

11 CRIME AND DISORDER AND RISK ASSESSMENT

11.1 None associated with this report.

12 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROPOSALS

12.1 The proposals are being considered to ensure that no councillor is disadvantaged during this period. When all Council Members are able to access meetings using an electronic solution and a Full Council meeting can be held the full programme of meetings will be restored.

13 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOCIAL VALUE)

13.1 Whilst the coronavirus remains prevalent, arrangements will continue to be monitored and updated to reflect current and emerging issues.

14 IMPACT ON ANY COUNCIL MANAGED PROPERTY OR LAND

14.1 None associated with this report.

15 CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

15.1 Budget and Corporate Management Scrutiny Board have requested an initial position statement on the arrangements for elected members to attend and participate remotely in committee meetings.

16 BACKGROUND PAPERS

16.1 None associated with this report.

17 APPENDICES:

None.

Surjit Tour
Director of Law and Governance