Report to	Members New Ways of Working Task & Finish Group
Date of meeting	19th October 2021
Lead Member / Officer	Cllr Hugh Evans – Leader/Cllr Julian Thompson-Hill, Lead Member for Finance & Property Gary Williams, Head of Democratic Services & HR Alan Smith – Head of Business Improvement & Modernisation
Report author	Gary Williams/Alan Smith
Title	Proposals for Members to adopt new Ways of Working

1. What is the report about?

This report summarises proposals generated by the work of the New Ways of Working Task & Finish Group, and which are intended to apply to the new Council following the elections in May 2022. The report considers two elements: Firstly, how Members should conduct meetings and secondly, what ICT equipment do they need to do so.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

To provide Members with clear recommendations on how to respond to the move towards greater use of virtual and hybrid working following an initial task and Finish Group meeting where this aspiration was set out.

3. What are the Recommendations?

It is recommended that members consider the information contained within this Report and attached Appendices and recommend that:

3.1. A meeting protocol be drawn up setting out the most appropriate method by which to hold different categories of meeting on the basis of the proposals set

out in the report. This protocol should also set out the expectations of both officers and members in their conduct of such meetings.

3.2. ICT equipment provided to Members in the new Council should be as set out in Section 2 of the report

3.3. These proposals should be taken forward as recommendations to the Democratic Services Committee.

4.   Report details

4.1   <u>Section 1: How should Members conduct meetings in the new Council?</u>

<u>Background</u>

4.1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic brought the formal democratic meetings of local authorities to a stop in March 2020 as the national lockdown prevented officers and members from meeting in the traditional way, and the existing legislation governing the meetings and proceedings of local authorities did not allow for fully remote attendance.

4.1.2 Emergency legislation in the form of the Coronavirus Act 2020 was passed in April 2020 which empowered Welsh Minsters to make regulations to allow local authority meetings to be conducted virtually. The Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020 were made at the end of April 2020 and provided that meetings could be held without the need for any member to be present at a specific location as long as everyone attending the meeting was able to hear the proceedings and could be heard by those attending. The rights of the press and public to attend meetings were suspended, however, we provided access to the local democracy reporter to all of our virtual meetings.

4.1.3 Members will recall that formal meetings of Cabinet began in May 2020 with a gradual resumption of meetings of all committees by virtual means leading to the full suite of democratic meetings being conducted virtually from September 2020. By December 2020 the Council had progressed to running fully bilingual virtual meetings which were being simultaneously broadcast to the public. This has remained the position to date.

4.1.4 In January 2021 the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 was granted Royal Assent and included provisions governing the conduct of local authority meetings in Wales. There are two main changes brought about by this Act:

4.1.5 The first is that all public meetings of Council, Cabinet and formal committees must be broadcast live and made available for later viewing.

4.1.6 The second is that the Council must make arrangements to ensure that meetings are able to be held by virtual means and that any person who wishes to attend can do so remotely.

4.2. The range of meetings that elected members attend

4.2.1 This group has been tasked with considering the arrangements that should be made for the meetings which involve elected members in the new Council following the local government elections to be held in May 2022. There are different categories of meetings that are held by the Council in which members are involved.

4.2.2 The first of these is the formal statutory meetings of the Council, Cabinet and various committees which are required to give access to the press and the public. A full list of these is set out in Appendix 1 to this report.

4.2.3 There are other formal meetings to which the press and public have access but which are meetings that involve external partners such as joint committees. A non-exhaustive list of these is contained in Appendix 2 to this report.

4.2.4 There are other meetings of bodies which are not statutory committees of the Council but are internal meetings to which the press and public are not required to have access. A non-exhaustive list of these meetings is contained in Appendix 3

4.3. **The possible methods by which meetings may be conducted**

4.3.1 There are three main methods by which meetings may be conducted.

- **Virtual** – this would involve all of the participants attending the meeting by virtual means with no specified location for the meeting.

- **Face to face** – this would involve all of the participants attending at a specified location in order that the meeting can be conducted in one place.

- **Hybrid** – a specified location is identified for a meeting and participants choose whether to attend in person at that location, or, alternatively, to attend remotely

in such a way that they are able to fully participate in the meeting howsoever they attend.

4.3.2 In considering which of these methods is the most appropriate for the conduct of a particular meeting, a number of factors will need to be considered and balanced.

4.3.3 The Council has declared a Climate Change and Ecological Emergency. The use of virtual means by which to conduct meetings has resulted in a reduction in the amount of travel undertaken, by both officers and members, to and from council buildings (predominantly in Ruthin) to attend meetings. The vast majority of this travel would have been undertaken in vehicles that would be emitting carbon. The reduction to a minimum of such travel is therefore an important consideration in assessing the method by which certain meetings should be conducted.

4.3.4 As well as reducing carbon emissions, this reduction in travel will have resulted in a reduction in the amount of money spent on the reimbursement of travel expenses to both officers and members.

4.3.5 A further benefit of virtual meetings is the reduction in the amount of time spent travelling to and from meetings, both by members and officers. It is clearly a more efficient use of the valuable and limited time of both officers and members to reduce to a minimum the amount of time spent travelling.

4.3.6 There are other benefits of virtual meetings. Members will be aware of the commitment made by Council to the Diversity in Democracy Declaration adopted at Full Council in September 2021. A key part of this declaration is that the Council commits to a collaborative and inclusive culture which makes possible the participation of as many people as possible in the democratic process. The Democratic Services Committee will be working on an action plan for how the Council will achieve greater diversity. An important part of this work will be having a system of meetings which encourage people to stand for election who might otherwise find the process inaccessible. This will include holding meetings at times of the day and by means which enable those in full time employment, those who are disabled, or those who have caring responsibilities for example to participate fully. It is important that these benefits are not lost when current work from home guidance is removed by Welsh Government.

4.3.7   It is also true that despite the many benefits of virtual meetings, some members feel that face to face meetings enable them to engage better in debate and to be able to interpret the atmosphere of a meeting, or the body language of participants. It is also true that some members miss the social benefits of interacting directly with their peers in the same location.

4.4. Proposals for new ways of conducting Council business

4.4.1   It is likely that not every type of meeting set out in the three appendices to this report will be most effectively conducted by just one of the three methods of conducting meetings that have been identified. In particular, it will not be possible to require that the public meetings of the Council's formal committees be held in a purely face to face manner. This is because the law will require that any member who wishes to attend remotely must be able to do so.

<u>Formal decision making committees</u>

4.4.2   In terms of the meetings listed in Appendices 1 and 2 there are therefore only 2 options, Virtual meetings or Hybrid meetings. In terms of the meetings listed in Appendix 1 it would seem appropriate to sub divide these meetings as they will attract varied levels of interest from the public and elected members.

4.4.3   It is suggested that the bodies which are formal decision making bodies of the Council should meet by means of the Hybrid method. This would mean that members who wished to attend the physical location of a meeting could choose to do so but that equally they could attend by remote means from another location. This would enable members who feel better able to debate and engage with the meeting in person to do so when important decisions are to be made.

4.4.4   The formal decision making bodies are Council, Cabinet, Planning Committee and Licensing Committee. It may be particularly important for members of the public who need to address either Planning or Licensing Committee sitting in a quasi-judicial capacity to be able to do so either physically or remotely, whichever suits their circumstances best.

4.4.5   The meetings that are listed in Appendix 2 are those involving partners from other local authorities or public bodies within the region. It will not therefore be solely the decision of this Council as to the method by which these meetings should be conducted. However, it is suggested that for reasons of efficiency and

environmental responsibility that these meetings should be conducted remotely to avoid officers and members criss-crossing the region to attend face to face meetings.

4.4.6   It is not yet known when health and safety risk assessments will allow the attendance of all members who may wish to attend one of the larger bodies such as Council. The Council will have to continue to abide by the guidance issued by Government and the conclusions of any risk assessments that are carried out in accordance with that guidance.

Scrutiny and Regulatory Committees

4.4.7   The Council's three Scrutiny Committees and the Governance and Audit Committee are not, for the most part bodies which make formal decisions on behalf of the Council. They do however play an important part in the process of holding the Executive to account and in accordance with the principles behind the establishment of executive arrangements, Scrutiny committees should have parity of esteem with Cabinet.

4.4.8   This parity of esteem does not preclude the holding of these meetings by purely virtual means but there is an argument that these too should be conducted by Hybrid means in order that members have the option of choosing the method of attendance that best suits their circumstances.

4.4.9   The Standards Committee is made up of predominantly independent lay members whose views would need to be consulted upon. This Committee's meetings consist of both routine meetings which may lend themselves to Virtual meetings and hearings which can involve the examination and cross-examination of witnesses which would be likely to be better suited to Hybrid meetings.

Other formal Committees

4.4.10 The remaining formal committees of the Council listed in Appendix 1 are meetings which it is suggested should be conducted by Virtual means. Indeed, the Joint Consultative Committee has often found itself inquorate due to the difficulties encountered by the trade unions to have sufficient representatives available to attend. Virtual meetings would assist with travelling time

commitments and may well enable the meetings to be quorate on a more consistent basis.

<u>Internal meetings</u>

4.4.11 The meetings listed in Appendix 3 are internal meetings of groups that are not statutory committees and to which the public do not have access. It is suggested that these meetings should be held as Virtual meetings as they are internal business meetings and do not require physical attendance. This does not mean that in exceptional circumstances they could not meet by Hybrid means but their proceedings lend themselves to remote attendance.

4.4.12 The Member Area Groups (MAGs) are included in this group of meetings. It is suggested that these be held as Virtual meetings, particularly because these meetings have in the past been held in their own localities and we do not have the technological equipment installed in these localities to be able to run Hybrid meetings. The capability to run Hybrid meetings is, at present, confined to the Council Chamber in Ruthin. This means that MAGs would either have to meet entirely face to face or virtually. For all the reasons of efficiency and environmental considerations it is suggested that these meetings should be Virtual meetings.

4.5. Protocols

4.5.1 In moving to the suggested new ways of working it is proposed that there be a protocol drawn up to provide some guidance to chairs, members and officers on the conduct of both Virtual and Hybrid meetings. See **Appendix 4** for draft guidance.

4.6. Training

4.6.1 The chairing of Hybrid or Virtual meetings can be challenging. It is proposed that early in the new Council there be specific training provided to chairs on the skills required to chair such meetings, to include the key elements of the protocol outlined above.

Section 2: What ICT equipment do Members need?

4.7. Background and the rationale for change

4.7.1   ICT & Digital Services underpin all council services both internal and public facing as well as interoperability across partners, regionally and nationally including both Welsh and UK governments.

4.7.2   The demand on the Service has grown significantly in recent years and the pandemic has impacted that demand still further. Although it was recommended by the Service that elected members migrate from iPads to laptops in the lead up to the current council the members working group at that time decided to continue with iPads as standard for elected members. However, this situation is no longer sustainable and the Council now needs to ensure that ICT equipment available to members meets today's need is appropriate for future need wherever possible.

4.8. Current Members ICT provision

4.8.1   The Covid Pandemic has significantly changed the way in which the Council now operates with most staff working from home, the impact for members has also been significant, with online meetings being the default during the pandemic and the expectation is that this will continue alongside hybrid and face to face meetings.

4.8.2   At the beginning of the pandemic it became clear that the iPads were no longer fit for purpose and all Members were issued with laptops (in addition to their iPads) to enable them to attend and follow meetings (on WebEx initially, but then via both Teams and Zoom for public meetings).

4.8.3   As members are now much more reliant on ICT their support needs have significantly grown too and there have been frustrations at times when members have been unable to join online meetings for a variety of reasons. This frustration has only been compounded by ICT support staff not being able to

effectively support members using iPads remotely because iPads are not fully integrated into the Council's network. In addition, many Members still have poor quality broadband provision as well as the technology being implemented was new and at times problematic itself.

4.9. Proposed Members ICT provision

4.9.1   It is proposed that the Council withdraws the iPads for members in time for the upcoming elections, (SLT iPad users have already committed to do this by the end of March 2022), and that members of the new council be issued with a council owned mobile phone and a laptop (for business use only).

4.9.2   The mobile phones will provide access to email and calendar information and the laptops will be the default device for members when attending meetings online or hybrid meetings. Members will be expected to access good quality broadband provision wherever possible to enable them to carry out their duties. If this is not possible then there will be the option to travel to a local council building to facilitate connectivity.

4.9.3   This adoption of laptops by default and decommissioning iPads will mean that ICT staff will be able to directly control Members' laptops with Members full permission and visibility. This will enable ICT staff to address any issues immediately, thus reducing the occurrences when members are unable to join meetings and in turn reducing frustrations Members may have when trying to go about Council business.

4.9.4   As a result of the proposed changes it is acknowledged that some Members will be disappointed to no longer have a DCC iPad, but the ability to have prompt and effective support remotely will deliver more efficiency and less frustration. Coupled with the introduction of e-mail capable mobile phones for Members little if any of the functionality of the iPads will be lost. A full package of training will be available to Members and in addition to the laptops, external monitors, keyboards and mice could be provided as options to members if required. All ICT technical support for iPads would therefore cease at the end of the current administration.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

This decision will have a potentially positive impact upon the priority related to the environment.

6. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

As all Members' laptops are relatively new it's unlikely that there will be any significant cost incurred in their provision. Mobile phones will be sourced under the Council's existing mobile telephony contract and by utilising existing provision within the contract this is likely to be cost neutral.

7. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment?

A Well-being impact assessment has not been prepared in respect of this report.

8. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

There have been no consultations with Scrutiny. This report is seeking the views of the Task and Finish Group in order that a recommendation may be made to Democratic Services Committee

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

As highlighted in section 5 it is anticipated that the changes will be able to be maintained within existing budgets, however this will need to be monitored closely over the coming months.

10. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

There is a risk that the benefits of the advances in remote meeting technology and practice are lost without a structured approach to the use of remote and hybrid meetings and the provision of adequate equipment to enable such meetings.

11. Power to make the decision

s111 Local Government Act 1972