

Report to	Democratic Services Committee
Date of meeting	27 November 2023
Lead Member	Councillor Julie Matthews, Lead Member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities
Head of Service	Catrin Roberts, Head of Corporate Support Service: People
Report author	Steve Price, Democratic Services Manager
Title	A Review into 'How Meetings are Held'

1. What is the report about?

- 1.1. This report is about the Council's arrangements for holding its member-level meetings.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

- 2.1. Shortly before the last council elections the previous Council administration took decisions on how Council meetings would be held. This was in response to changes during 2020 and 2021, a period of pandemic lock-downs which temporarily halted traditional face-to-face meetings, changes in the law governing certain Council and committee meetings, and the technical advancements made during that period that have allowed business to be conducted using virtual or hybrid meetings.

3. What are the Recommendations?

- 3.1 That the Democratic Services Committee considers the issues around how the Council's meetings are held and comments accordingly.

4. Report details

- 4.1. In December 2021 full Council considered a report on “Proposals for Members to adopt New Ways of Working”. That report outlined recommendations agreed at a members’ task and finish group and by the Democratic Services Committee that looked at the New Ways of Working agenda, primarily focusing on how members’ meetings should be conducted, and the ICT equipment required for Members.
- 4.2. The report and discussion at Council considered points in favour of virtual meetings, and points in favour of face-to-face meetings.

In favour of virtual meetings

- Council has declared a Climate Change and Ecological Emergency. Virtual meetings don’t have the carbon emissions generated from member and officer journeys to meeting venues.
- Reduction in travel expenses.
- Reduction in time spent travelling to meetings.
- Virtual meetings can be more accessible (participants can attend from wherever they happen to be, and the time commitment is limited to the meeting time itself) and likely to promote participation in local democracy.

In favour of face-to-face 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.
 - Some members miss the social benefits of interacting directly with their peers in the same location.
 - Any technical problems can affect the business being undertaken or the participation of those experiencing a technical problem.
- 4.3. Council acknowledged that it could not hold public meetings of its statutory committees as face-to-face meetings. Recent changes in the law in Wales arising from the COVID pandemic required local authorities to offer remote attendance for those meetings, thereby leaving the virtual or hybrid meeting options.

4.4. In addition to the main public Council and committee meetings, councillors participate in a range of internal meetings, for panels and groups established by the Council to consult and engage with members on specific topics. These meetings are not under the statutory requirements of the public committees and therefore the Council can choose whether they are held as face-to-face, virtual or hybrid meetings. In 2021, Council decided that these internal meetings would by default be held as virtual meetings (unless an overriding necessity required specific meetings to be held as face-to-face or hybrid meetings).

The 'How Meetings are Held' (2023) Working Group

4.5. In 2023 the Council's Group Leaders called for a new member working group to be formed to review the 2021 decisions. This would allow the new Council to express its views on the meeting arrangements left by the previous Council. The working group's task was to consider the legal framework and options available in order to present any recommendations to the Democratic Services Committee and full Council. The 'How Meetings are Held' working group met on the 28th September 2023 and agreed that a survey would be conducted to capture the views of members and relevant officers. It is intended that the survey will be available during November, and an update will be provided to the Democratic Services Committee at today's meeting. The working group will re-convene once the results of the survey are available.

4.6. The 2023 working group is also looking at best practices for hybrid and virtual meetings. In 2021 Council adopted a hybrid committee meetings protocol designed to guide participants and clarify expectations. The provisions in the protocol are in most respects appropriate for virtual meetings too. The protocol is attached as appendix 1.

5. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Plan 2022 to 2027: The Denbighshire We Want?

5.1. The issues covered in this report relate to the corporate plan themes of 'a better connected Denbighshire' and 'a well-run, high performing Council'.

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

6.1. Paragraph 4.2 outlines the cost elements of how meetings are held that were considered by full Council in 2021. These include carbon emissions, travelling costs and the time spent or saved by how members and officers attend meetings.

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

7.1. A well being impact assessment is not required for this report.

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

8.1 The relevant forum for reporting and consulting on the issues raised in this report is the Democratic Services Committee.

9. Chief Finance Officer Statement

9.1. A Chief Finance Officer Statement is not required for this report.

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

10.1. The 'How Meetings are Held' Working Group's review is considering the advantages and disadvantages of each meeting format, and through reviewing the Council's hybrid meeting protocol it is seeking to have appropriate measures in place that have the support of the current membership.

11. Power to make the decision

11.1. This is a consultation report and no formal decisions are required. The legislation referred to in this report includes the Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021 and emergency legislation and regulations from the Coronavirus Act 2020.