

Report to	Democratic Services Committee
Date of meeting	22 March 2024
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	Working Group Recommendations: '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 and

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 lockdowns 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 whether to endorse to full Council the recommendations of the working group, as outlined in paragraph 4.9.

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. 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.

4.2. 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 required local authorities to offer remote attendance for those meetings, thereby leaving the virtual or hybrid meeting options.

4.3. 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

- 4.4. In 2023 the Council's Group Leaders called for a new member working group to be formed to review the 2021 decisions by considering the legal framework and options available in order to present any recommendations to the Democratic Services Committee and full Council.
- 4.5. The working group, chaired by Councillor Julie Matthews, decided to issue a survey (attached as appendix 1) to councillors, lay-members and the senior leadership team. The working group also considered good practices for hybrid and virtual meetings. In 2021 Council adopted a hybrid committee meetings protocol designed to guide participants and clarify expectations. The protocol attached as appendix 2 contains amendments recommended by the working group.

The Survey

- 4.6. Appendix 1 contains the survey questions, results and analysis considered by the working group in February 2024. The survey responses indicated that extending the range of meetings held as hybrid meetings would be popular with many members. Hybrid and virtual meetings both allow participants to attend virtually so hybrid could be seen as the optimum option for those who have not chosen face-to-face meetings in the survey. However, hybrid meetings will include at least some of the carbon, travel expenses and time costs that Council in 2021 was keen to reduce and are not a feature of virtual meetings.
- 4.7. The costs of hybrid meetings will also include the on-site attendance of support officers (to operate the hybrid system being used and for general support tasks

associated with using a physical meeting location). The range and availability of suitable hybrid meeting rooms is also a relevant consideration.

The Working Group's Conclusions

- 4.8. The working group was keen to promote high standards of meeting behaviour and professionalism for the Council's public hybrid meetings. These are reflected in the changes proposed to the protocol (appendix 2). The working group was of the view that the extensive use of virtual interactions had come at a cost by constricting the development of effective peer relationships amongst members.
- 4.9. The working group was satisfied the existing arrangements for holding internal member-level meetings virtually was largely appropriate. However, the survey results and the working group's views supported allowing the individual Member Area Groups (MAGs) to decide how their meetings would be held.

Recommendation 1: That the Hybrid meetings Protocol be amended as indicated in appendix 2 to promote high standards of meeting behaviour and practices for both hybrid and virtual member-level meetings.

Recommendation 2: That internal member-level meetings (excluding the MAGs) be held as virtual meetings unless there is an over-riding benefit to the Council from holding a meeting as a hybrid or face-to-face meeting.

Recommendation 3: That the individual Member Area Groups be allowed to decide whether their meetings be held as face-to-face, hybrid or virtual. In determining this the MAGs should have due regard to the added costs of carbon dioxide emissions, travel expenses and officer time associated with hybrid and face-to-face meetings.

Recommendation 4: That the Democratic Services Committee consider whether any hybrid MAG meetings should only be held in the Council's free to access hybrid meeting rooms, or whether hybrid MAG meetings could be held from hired external locations.

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 outline the main cost elements associated with how meetings are held. These include carbon emissions, travelling costs and the time spent or saved by how members and officers attend meetings. The hiring of external hybrid meeting rooms for MAG meetings would be an additional financial cost.

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 considered the advantages and disadvantages of each meeting format, and through surveying members and reviewing the Council's hybrid meeting protocol it seeks to have appropriate measures in place that have the support of the current membership.

11. Power to make the decision

11.1. Any formal decisions would be made by full Council in response to recommendations from the Democratic Services Committee.