

REPORT TO A MEETING OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE TO BE HELD ON 9TH JULY 2020

FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF MEETINGS

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To further consider issues relating to the Council's management of meetings and communication arising in the period following the Coronavirus emergency.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 The meeting of the Committee held on 10th June considered a Report made to the Council in relation to matters arising from the Council's response to the Coronavirus emergency, particularly the manner in which meetings of the Council and its Committees had been conducted.

2.2 The Committee noted that a meeting of the Communications Working Group had been convened for the purpose of considering how the Council was utilising various media forms to communicate both internally and externally. It was noted that a meeting of the Communications Working Group had been convened for the purpose of considering how the Council was utilising various media forms to communicate both internally and externally. It was therefore agreed that a further report is made to this meeting taking account of the Working Group discussions.

2.3 This report explores some of the key communication issues for the Council in the light of the developing situation.

3. MANAGEMENT OF MEETINGS

3.1 The introduction by the UK Government of restrictions on 23rd March followed on from earlier advice that large public gatherings should be avoided to minimise the risk of increasing the rate of infection from the Covid 19 virus. This resulted in the cancellation of the Annual Town Assembly originally scheduled for 6th April and meetings of the Town Council Planning Committee on 26th March and 16th April, and the Policy and Resources Committee on 30th March.

3.2 Assessment of various remote platforms led to the Council adopting Zoom as its preferred platform and all Council meetings held since mid -April have now been conducted by this means including the Annual Meeting of the Council. Feedback from Members of the Council has been generally favourable as use of video meetings has progressed relatively smoothly with a small increase in attendance by members of the public a noteworthy feature.

3.3 The original report to Council identified certain issues that need consideration moving forward. These include:-

(a) Maintaining transparency of the decision making process through access to meetings by Members of the public;

(b) Managing expectations for visualising Council meetings in the period after the Covid-19 emergency is over.

3.4 Maintaining transparent access to meetings

In relation to (a) above, meetings are presently publicised with details on how to obtain access remotely. Members of the public are therefore able to join a meeting and be admitted to participate in the public forum should they wish. There are sufficient safeguards within the meeting software to exclude anyone who is disruptive to the meeting process.

Many local Councils are now taking the opportunity to stream meetings almost instantaneously via platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Whilst meetings of the Town Council are currently recorded they are not, with the exception of the Annual Council Meeting, being streamed on the internet. This is an option for the Committee to consider.

3.5 Managing future meetings

At present it is not clear when the current restrictions on group gatherings indoor will be relaxed to the extent that meetings will once again be permitted face to face. It is likely however that the legislation permitting local authorities to host remote meetings will be extended beyond the time-span of the Coronavirus Act 2020 which expires in May 2021. This will give the Council the opportunity to consider whether it wishes to continue inviting remote participation at meetings when these are conducted in a traditional face to face manner.

The Council does not presently benefit from the infrastructure to record and broadcast meetings held face to face, though the ability to do so is provided in the Council Chamber owned by Warwick District Council. Should the Council wish to pursue this option it is suggested that initially discussions are commenced with Warwick District Council to establish the viability of use by the Town Council.

4. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

4.1 The Communications Working Group has held its first meeting on 18th June and initially focused on the use of the Council's website and social media. The Group has agreed to prioritise at its next meeting:

- information that should be published on the Council's website and social media pages
- the process for how information will be generated, moderated and published

The Action notes from the meeting of the Group are attached to this Report.

4.2 The Council website is used as the principal means of publishing details of Council meetings and this is supplemented by use of social media to further publicise general items of interest and drive traffic to the website. The Communications Group will be considering at future meetings the exploitation of these opportunities, both in terms of meetings of the Council and information generally.

5. RECOMMENDATION

5.1 The Committee is recommended to:

- (i) consider whether it wishes to “live” stream meetings of the Council and Committees to the internet;
- (ii) consider the implications for managing public access to meetings following the removal of restrictions on social distancing;
- (iii) investigate the options for providing remote access to meetings that take place face to face with a view to a report being presented to the meeting in September 2020; and
- (iv) note the initial discussions of the Communications Working Group regarding the exploitation of social media for the purposes of publishing information on Council meetings and activities.