

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL – 13 JANUARY 2022

REVIEW OF HYBRID MEETINGS PILOT

1 Executive Summary/Recommendations

1.1 This report updates Full Council on the first phase of the Choice Based Blended Model for Fully Virtual and Hybrid Meetings and seeks agreement as to the next phase:

1.1.1 Between September 2021 and December 2021, five meetings were held as hybrid, using existing equipment. Feedback has been mixed (**Appendix 2**), with the main issues relating to audio quality for attendees participating virtually and the visibility of those attending in person on the virtual platform. The number of attendees who originally indicated a wish to attend in person also dropped, resulting in higher numbers of virtual attendees that originally expected (**Appendix 1**).

1.1.2 At time of writing this report, the public health advice is to return to home working in light of the Omicron variant, the full impact of which is currently unknown. Taking this into account, alongside the feedback from the hybrid meeting pilot, it is therefore recommended that Full Council reverts to *Fully Virtual* meetings for the next phase of the transition to a Choice Based Blended Model for Fully Virtual and Hybrid Meetings and reviews the position at its meeting on 3 March 2022. In the interim, officers will explore the addition of cameras and microphones to Surface Hubs, to ascertain whether this will resolve the audio and visual issues highlighted in the *Hybrid* pilot.

1.1.3 Full Council is also asked to note that the Council will move from Skype to Teams as a virtual platform from March 2022.

1.2 The Council is recommended to:

1.2.1 **Consider the update on the first phase of hybrid meetings;**

1.2.2 **In respect of the next phase of the transition to a Choice Based Blended Model for Fully Virtual and Hybrid Meetings, agree:**

- (a) **To revert to *Fully Virtual* meetings as the default;**
- (b) **To instruct officers to trial solutions to address audio and visual issues identified during the *Hybrid* pilot using existing Surface Hubs in Viewmount and Committee Room 5; and**
- (c) **To review the position at its meeting on 3 March 2022.**

1.2.3 **Note that the Council will move to Microsoft Teams as the virtual platform for meetings from March 2022.**

2 Decision Making Route

- 2.1 Following the onset of lockdown in March 2020, Full Council moved to fully virtual meetings as the default due to the impact of coronavirus restrictions. On 23 September 2021, as the restrictions began to ease, Full Council considered options for hybrid meeting arrangements and agreed to transition to a Choice Based Blended Model for fully virtual and hybrid meeting arrangements. It was further agreed that, due to the challenges in introducing hybrid meetings, which were largely of a technological and facilities nature, the first phase of the transition would be a pilot of a limited number of meeting groups. This report provides Full Council with an update on the pilot.
- 2.2 At the same time, Full Council instructed officers to instruct external consultants to undertake an assessment of audio visual requirements for meeting venues and report back on options for equipment upgrades.

3 Discussion

Outcome of Hybrid Meetings Pilot

- 3.1 At its meeting on 23 September 2021 Full Council agreed a timetable for phase 1 of the hybrid pilot, which identified selected meeting groups for inclusion in the first phase. It was agreed that these would consist of Policy and Audit Committees and Area Committees in order to give all Members the opportunity to experience a hybrid meeting.
- 3.2 **Appendix 1** outlines the Committees included within the pilot, together with the numbers of those who had initially indicated they would attend in person, but subsequently decided to attend virtually. Whilst this highlights the benefits of the Choice Based model, allowing flexibility for participants, it did mean that numbers of in person attendees were low. On three occasions, the Chair of the Committee determined that a meeting previously scheduled as hybrid would in fact be fully virtual in view of the fact that the number of in person attendees had reduced. In general, most officers attended the hybrid meetings virtually, including presenting officers and the monitoring solicitor, with only the committee officers and Director or Area Manager attending in person.
- 3.3 Feedback was sought from both Members and officers after every hybrid meeting via a short survey and is summarized in **Appendix 2**. Issues highlighted included the audio quality of those speaking in the room, which varied for those attending virtually, making it difficult on occasion to hear the in person speakers clearly. Virtual attendees also raised the point that the room view on the virtual platform does not focus on speakers in the room, therefore they could not be clearly identified. These issues reflect the limitations of the equipment the Council currently has available to facilitate a hybrid meeting. However extensive testing by Committee officers ensured that the equipment was used to the best of its ability and this testing continued throughout the pilot period. It should be noted that whilst there were on occasion some technical difficulties all business was successfully conducted.
- 3.4 Clear guidance was issued to both Elected Members and officers on the office arrangements in place to mitigate the risks of Covid-19 transmission. This

included the completion of training in advance of attending buildings, wearing of face masks and use of cleaning equipment. All who attended the meetings in person agreed they had sufficient information, support and guidance for Health and Safety and Hybrid Meeting procedures, though a few members noted that the training was very detailed/lengthy, and the facilities did not fully reflect what was highlighted within the training.

- 3.5 During the pilot period, the 2 metre distancing rule was reduced to 1 metre distancing in meeting rooms, in recognition of the increased vaccination rates and the option for vulnerable participants to attend virtually. Although this would have allowed for more to attend in person, the numbers of in person attendees was still well within the capacities permitted under the 2 metre distancing rule.
- 3.6 It should be noted that as at the time of writing this report the advice from the Scottish Government in response to the new Omicron variant of coronavirus is to return to working from home, avoiding all but essential face to face meetings. It is therefore recommended that the Council returns to *Fully Virtual* meetings as the default, pending a further review in March, to provide certainty to Members and Officers and ensure mitigation against the spread of the virus. This would also allow officers to undertake further testing of equipment for *Hybrid* meetings, as explained in further detail below.

Equipping *Hybrid* Meetings

- 3.7 Following Full Council's instruction, officers have investigated options for upgrading the audio visual equipment at meeting venues in order to improve the hybrid user experience. This has so far been restricted to looking at the meeting rooms in Woodhill House, however investigations are ongoing in respect of the area venues where there are different considerations that need to be taken into account.
- 3.8 As was highlighted in the report to Full Council on 23rd September, a full upgrade of the audio visual equipment in the Council Chamber and Committee Room 5 is likely to cost between £50,000 and £150,000. This would involve installing a new camera tracking system, new microphones and new voting systems, all with the latest technology to facilitate a *Hybrid* meeting.
- 3.9 Whilst a full upgrade of current audio visual equipment would achieve a far superior *Hybrid* experience for both participants and viewers, it would not be without significant investment. The *Hybrid* pilot has also proved that the Council has the equipment to facilitate a *Hybrid* meeting, albeit there are areas for improvement in terms of the audio quality and virtual view of speakers. In order to address these issues, officers have consulted external specialists who have advised that it may be possible to link a camera tracker to a Surface Hub to capture speakers on screen during the meeting, and connect this to existing microphones. The costs for this would be between £750 and £3000, however there would be the potential to trial such equipment prior to purchase which officers would pursue.
- 3.10 It is therefore proposed that officers explore upgrading current Surface Hubs in the first instance, through the installation of additional cameras, and linking to existing microphones. Both Committee Room 5 and Viewmount would be used

to pilot trial equipment, with a view to rolling out to other meeting venues if this achieves the desired solution. Reverting to *Fully Virtual* meetings meantime will give officers the opportunity to further explore and test the potential for the audio and visual capabilities of the Surface Hub, with the additional equipment. The outcome of the testing will be reported back to Full Council in March, with proposals for *Hybrid* meetings moving forward.

Webcasting

- 3.11 The livestreaming and webcasting of meetings is currently operated internally by the Area and Committee Services teams, using Microsoft Teams Live. Prior to lockdown, an external provider provided a webcasting and storage service for meetings of Full Council, Policy and Audit Committees, however following the move to *Fully Virtual* meetings during lockdown all meetings of the Council, its Committees and Sub-Committees were livestreamed. Legal colleagues have advised that the livestreaming of *Fully Virtual* meetings is a requirement in order to comply with the statutory duty to ensure public access. Officers will continue to facilitate the livestreaming of meetings inhouse during the next phase, but will keep this under review in terms of the impact on staffing resources.

Moving from Skype to Microsoft Teams

- 3.12 The Council currently uses Skype for Business as the virtual meeting platform, and has done since moving to fully virtual meetings in March 2020. Skype for Business will however soon be phased out by Microsoft. Members should therefore note that testing is currently underway on Microsoft Teams, with a view to moving to that application for virtual meetings. Members will already be familiar with Teams, it being used by many partners for virtual meetings, and will be aware of the benefits it offers in terms of an enhanced user experience with the option to have multiple attendees on the screen. The move to Teams is currently scheduled for March 2022 and training will be offered for Elected Members, with updated guidance and procedures in advance of the change.

4 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

- 4.1 This report supports all six of the Council priorities by ensuring the effective conduct of Committee business, and in particular the underlying principle of “*having the right people, in the right place, at the right time.*”

Pillar	Priority
Our People	Education Health & Wellbeing
Our Environment	Infrastructure Resilient Communities
Our Economy	Economy & Enterprise Estate Modernisation

- 4.2 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendation(s) is (are) agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial	X		
Staffing	X		
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland	X		
Children and Young People's Rights and Wellbeing		X	
Climate Change and Sustainability	X		
Health and Wellbeing		X	
Town Centre First		X	

4.3 There will be staffing implications if livestreaming continues internally, in that officers in both the Area and Committee Services teams will continue to be required to facilitate this work. The resource implications of this will be closely monitored. That said, reverting to *Fully Virtual* meetings will increase capacity with the Area and Committee Services teams and IT by removing the additional staffing resource required to facilitate a *Hybrid* meeting.

4.4 There will be financial implications in purchasing additional cameras but it is considered that costs can be met from existing budgets, and a trial period will ensure any equipment purchased is fit for purpose.

4.5 The [integrated impact assessment](#) previously carried out and reported to Full Council on 23rd September remains relevant and there have been no material changes since that date. There is a positive impact on the protected groups Disability and Pregnancy and Maternity in continuing with virtual attendance at meetings.

4.6 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level:

ACORP004 – Business and Organisational Transformation

ACORP006 – Reputational Management

ACORP009 – Operational Risk Management (including health and safety)

5 Scheme of Governance

5.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this report and had no comments to make.

5.2 Full Council is able to consider and take a decision on this item as it relates to the agreement of arrangements for meetings of the Council and its Committees which is not a matter delegated to any Committee of the Council.

Ritchie Johnson, Director of Business Services

Report prepared by Ruth O'Hare, Legal Service Manager (Governance)
Date 16 December 2021

List of Appendices –

Appendix 1 – Timetable of Hybrid Meetings

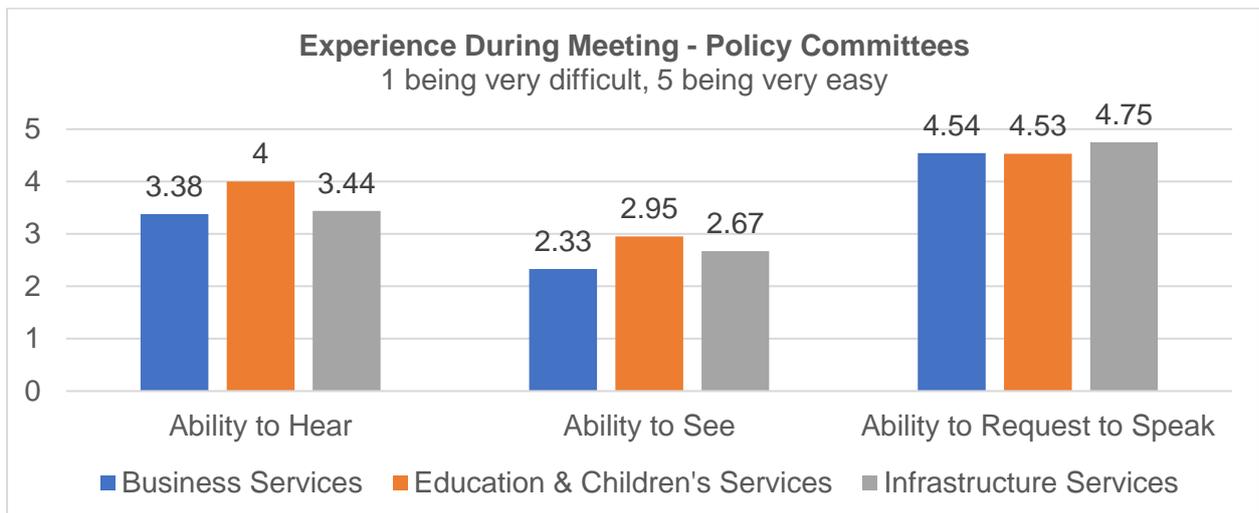
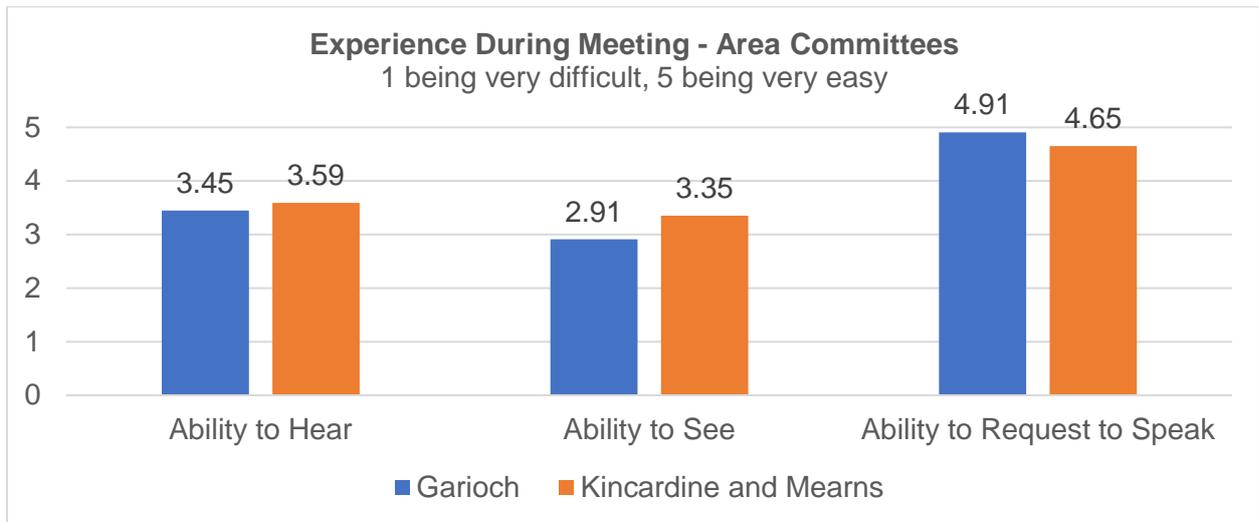
Appendix 2 – Feedback from Pilot

The number of Members who indicated a wish to attend in person/virtually through the Your Choices survey is indicated in brackets, next to the actual number in attendance in person/virtually at the meeting.

Date	Committee	Venue	Outcome	Members in person	Members virtual
7 October	Education and Children's Services Committee	CmRm 5	A hybrid meeting took place in CmRm 5.	4 (7)	10 (7)
4 November	Audit Committee	CmRm 5	The Chair determined to hold a <i>Fully Virtual</i> meeting after number of in person attendees fell to 2		
9 November	Garioch Area Committee	Gordon House	A hybrid meeting took place in Gordon House.	6 (8)	9 (7)
11 November	Business Services Committee	CmRm 5	A hybrid meeting took place in CmRm 5.	3 (7)	10 (7)
16 November	Kincardine and Mearns Area Committee	Viewmount	A hybrid meeting took place in Viewmount.	6 (8)	5 (4)
23 November	Banff and Buchan Area Committee	Faithlie Centre	The Chair determined to hold a <i>Fully Virtual</i> meeting after the number of in person attendees fell to 2.		

25 November 2021	Infrastructure Services Committee	CmRm 5	A hybrid meeting took place in CmRm 5.	4 (7)	10 (7)
30 November	Buchan Area Committee	Buchan House	The meeting was cancelled due to the Storm Arwen response. The Chair determined to hold the adjourned meeting on 7 December as <i>Fully Virtual</i> .		
7 December	Formartine Area Committee	TBC	The Chair determined to hold a <i>Fully Virtual</i> meeting after being unable to find a suitable venue for <i>Hybrid</i> .		
9 December	Communities Committee	CmRm 5	The Chair determined to hold a <i>Fully Virtual</i> meeting after the number of in person attendees fell.		
14 December	Marr Area Committee	TBC	The Chair determined to hold a <i>Fully Virtual</i> meeting after being unable to find a suitable venue for <i>Hybrid</i> .		

APPENDIX 2



Additional comments from hybrid meeting attendees generally reflected the following themes:

- It was more difficult to hear and see attendees who joined from the venue, audio was temperamental at times.
- Behaviour change (muting microphones, speaking directly into microphones, speaking clearly) and additional equipment could have improved the meeting experience. However, meetings generally ran smoothly for a first attempt.
- The meeting experience appeared to be very different for those joining in person and those joining remotely.
- Hybrid meetings require a significant amount of testing, equipment and officer time, and could potentially incur both financial and environmental costs.
- Testing and preparation by officers had improved the experience.