

The background of the slide features a large, light blue watermark of the Coat of Arms of the City of Edinburgh. The crest includes a crown with four thistles, a shield divided into four quarters (top-left: a saltire, top-right: a stag's head, bottom-left: a ship, bottom-right: an eagle), and a motto scroll at the bottom with the text 'A'NE FOR A'.

Agenda Item 8

Future Arrangements for Council and Committee Meetings

Falkirk Council

Title: Future Arrangements for Council and Committee Meetings

Meeting: Falkirk Council

Date: 29 September 2021

Submitted by: Director of Corporate and Housing Services

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to consider future arrangements for Council and Committee meetings and to propose a limited trial of a blended meeting model.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that Council:-

- (1) agrees the proposed arrangements for Council and committee meetings set out in section 3 of this report, and
- (2) agrees that the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Group Leaders, is given authority to suspend the arrangements and revert to the current remote model for public health reasons.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on almost aspects of everyday life in 2020 and 2021, including the Council's ability to hold its meeting physically and in public. Remote committee meetings were introduced in May 2020, with the public excluded from attending on public health grounds. A degree of public accessibility was introduced, firstly by recording meetings which were then posted online, and then in August 2020 through the introduction of livestreamed meetings. In terms of press access, representatives of the press were permitted to join the remote meetings in order to view and report on proceedings during the period prior to meetings being livestreamed.

- 3.2 Update reports to Council on meeting arrangements have stressed the need to follow Scottish Government guidance in regard changing protection levels. As the country moved out of lockdown it was intended that the Council would move from remote meetings to a blended model which would allow some physical participation with the aim of returning to fully physical meetings when permitted. As before, the Scottish Government's covid protection levels guidance will determine the extent to which physical meetings can be held and at what stage the press and public will be able to attend any meetings that are held physically.
- 3.3 Council agreed in June 2021 to decommission the Municipal Buildings complex. The closure of the Municipal Buildings means that a new home for committee meetings will be required until such time as the new HQ becomes operational. The venue for meetings will be Falkirk Town Hall and, when this is unavailable, at Forth Valley College or a high school. It may be necessary if suitable accommodation is unavailable to hold meetings remotely.
- 3.4 While in normal times Falkirk Town Hall would be able to host all meetings of Council and its committees, the need to retain physical distancing will limit the options for physical meetings. The requirement for physical distancing ended when the Scottish Government announced that the country would move to protection level 0 in the summer. Despite this no longer being a requirement the Scottish Government strongly advises that physical distancing is retained where possible. It is proposed that for meetings with physical participation 1m physical distancing is observed. This will impact on the number of participants who may physically attend. The lesser Town Hall is able to accommodate up to 15 participants who are physically distanced by 1 metre. There is also space for a press table should the representative from the Falkirk Herald wish to attend physically.
- 3.5 Council was advised in June that there would be engagement with elected members on options for a blended return. Two engagement sessions were held, on 7 and 14 September, which allowed members to take part physically or remotely in trial blended meetings. The feedback from the sessions, on both members' views of the appropriateness of returning to physical meetings (whether fully physical or blended) and on the arrangements in place have informed the proposal set out below. A range of views were expressed in regard to returning to physical meetings – while generally most members would be content to introduce an element of physical participation, there were strong views from some members that a return to physical participation would not be appropriate given the current public health situation. In light of the comments received it is proposed that Council adopts a cautious approach which recognises the spectrum of views held by its elected members. It is proposed therefore that a blended meeting model is introduced for the meetings of the **Executive on 19 October** and the meeting of the **Scrutiny Committee on 11 November**. In this model physical participation by members would be on a voluntary basis.

- 3.6 Running a limited pilot will also provide officers with the opportunity to further test and refine the arrangements for blended meetings. In the tests so far it has been evident that the current Webex camera has limitations and that an upgraded version would need to be purchased in order to allow remote attendees to see clearly those who are physically participating in the meeting. Further investigation is needed into the best camera for our meeting room and when this is identified it will be purchased.
- 3.7 A report with further proposals in light of the pilot would be submitted to Council on 8 December.
- 3.8 All other meetings will continue to be held remotely, using Webex.

4. Consultation

- 4.1 Elected members were consulted on options for blended meetings at two engagement sessions in September 2021.

5. Implications

Financial

- 5.1 There is no additional cost involved in running the trials. It has not been necessary to purchase new equipment and the option proposed does not require additional staff to support meetings. However, there is a need to purchase an upgraded Webex camera for blended meetings. Any additional cost will be met from current budgets.

Resources

- 5.2 There are no resource implications arising from this report.

Legal

- 5.3 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Risk

- 5.4 The proposed return to physical meetings will be managed in accordance with current Scottish Government guidance. A risk assessment has been carried out and all appropriate precautions (such as physical distancing, access to the building for the duration of a meeting only, the provision of hand gel, guidance in regard to masks, tracking procedures) will be put in place.

Equalities

- 5.5 No equality issue arises at this stage.

Sustainability/Environmental Impact

- 5.6 No sustainability assessment has been completed as part of compiling the report.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 Council is asked to approve the proposed trial of a return to physical committee meetings using the Executive as a pilot.

Director of Corporate & Housing Services

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Appendices – none.

List of Background Papers:

No background papers were relied on in the preparation of this report in terms of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.