

Report – Policy and Resources Committee

Report of Urgent Action Taken: Audio-Visual Participation in Meetings and Re-introduction of Covid-19 Protocol

To be presented on Thursday, 13th January 2022

*To the Right Honourable The Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Commons
of the City of London in Common Council assembled.*

SUMMARY OF ACTION TAKEN

1. The outbreak of COVID-19 brought the issue of virtual meetings to the forefront for all public bodies in responding to the various restrictions that were in place at the time. It resulted in a rapid move to virtual meetings in the UK with Government introducing temporary, emergency, measures (the *Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020*) enabling formal decision-making meetings to be undertaken virtually until 6th May 2021.
2. Virtual meetings allowed for flexibility, helped to facilitate greater public scrutiny and aided Members and officers in conducting business more efficiently and operated with a degree of success nationally while measures were in place. Notwithstanding this, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) decided not to extend measures beyond 6th May 2021 to enable local authority meetings to continue virtually or indeed enable the City Corporation to move towards a hybrid format as had been envisaged.
3. Part 5A of the Local Government Act 1972 covers public access to meetings, agendas and reports, the inspection of minutes and background papers, etc. and applies to the Common Council in its capacity as a local authority and police authority. Without the modifications introduced by the 2020 Regulations the legislation prohibits formal meetings taking place virtually. This means that in order to participate in discussions and vote on decisions or recommendations, Members must be present physically at the meeting at which the matter is considered. The legislative framework does not apply to informal meetings such as call-overs and working parties.
4. Court of Common Council agreed at its meeting on 15th April 2021 to put in place a 'Covid' ratification process, i.e., holding an informal virtual meeting in the first instance to ascertain the general view of the Court or its committees, with the public being given access to the informal meeting to maintain transparency via live streaming and recording (with recordings retained for up to one year). A formal decision, which accurately reflected the mood of the informal meeting, could then be taken by the Town Clerk, or other officer nominated by him through delegated authority to formally approve such decisions pursuant to s.101(1) of the Local Government Act 1972.
5. In light of latest developments in the Covid-19 pandemic and the Omicron variant of concern seeing a significant increase in infections across London and nationally, a

number of Members had once again raised the issue of the City Corporation returning to informal meetings and the reintroduction of Covid-19 approval protocols to allow for these.

6. The Policy and Resources Committee subsequently considered the issue at its meeting on Thursday 16th December 2021 and agreed that the protocol should be re-instituted with immediate effect, with authority delegated to the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chairman, to take a decision as to a suitable end-point (bearing in mind the Covid-related situation and how it progressed). It was also clarified that meetings would be operated on a hybrid basis, to allow Members to dial in from Guildhall should they so wish; however, there was to be no expectation of officer attendance.
7. Court of Common Council was not due to meet again until 13 January 2022. In order to give effect to any decision as quickly as possible, approval was sought and obtained under Court of Common Council urgency procedures that:-
 - i. It be agreed that formal local and police authority business be dealt with via the "Covid" ratification process, on the same basis as approved by the Court in April 2021 (i.e., by holding an informal virtual meeting in the first instance to ascertain the general view of the Court or its committees, with the public being given access to the informal meeting to maintain transparency via live streaming and recording. A formal decision, which accurately reflects the mood of the informal meeting, can then be taken by the Town Clerk, or other officer nominated by him, who is hereby given delegated authority to formally approve such decisions pursuant to s.101(1) of the Local Government Act 1972.)
 - ii. The arrangements to be implemented with effect from 00.01am on 17 December 2021.
 - iii. That authority be delegated to the Town Clerk, in consultation with the Chair and Deputy Chairman, to take decision as to a suitable end-point (bearing in mind the Covid-related situation and how it progresses).
 - iv. The Town Clerk be authorised to make such amendments to Standing Orders and related corporate governance documentation as is required to give effect to the above decisions.

RECOMMENDATION

8. We **recommend** that the action taken be noted.

All of which we submit to the judgement of this Honourable Court.

DATED this 16th day of December 2021.

SIGNED on behalf of the Committee.

Deputy Catherine McGuinness
Chair, Policy & Resources Committee