FAREHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Report to the Executive for Decision
07 December 2021

Portfolio:	Policy and Resources
Subject:	**Virtual Briefing Meetings**
Report of:	Head of Democratic Services
Corporate Priorities:	A dynamic, prudent and progressive Council

Purpose:

To seek approval for a new approach and protocol for the way in which briefings and non-formal meetings are held between Council Officers and Elected Members.

Executive summary:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of Fareham Borough Council staff worked in the Council's offices, at other Council facilities (such as sheltered housing schemes) or worked across the borough maintaining our parks, collecting household waste, visiting people and homes, all with one thing in common; to provide high quality customer services across Fareham borough.

Whilst this remains the primary objective, the ways in which Council Officers and Elected Members communicate and work together has had to change during the pandemic in order to remain compliant with Government guidelines and restrictions on movement. This significantly reduced the number and frequency of face-to-face meetings.

Although we had already started the move to mobile and cloud-based ICT solutions, the pandemic led us to a rapid step-change in our use of mobile technology and working remotely. What we learnt from this experience, is that many of our services can be provided very effectively through remote working, and this led to a review being undertaken to consider how we might build on this approach in the future.

Recommendation/Recommended Option:

It is recommended that the Executive agrees that:

(a) all future Officer/Member briefings and non-formal meetings should be delivered via Microsoft Teams where possible and practical to do so; and

(b) the Virtual Meetings Protocol, as appended to this report be adopted.

Reason:
To act on the lessons learnt from responding to the pandemic and to maximise the use of technology to support communication with remote working.

Cost of proposals:
There are no direct costs associated with the delivery of this proposal as the technology to enable virtual meetings is provided as part of the Microsoft Office package.

Appendices: A: Protocol for Virtual Meetings

Background papers: None

Reference papers:

- Covid-19 Emergency Decisions and Democratic Services Recovery Plan – Council 22 October 2020
- The Council's Approach to the Pandemic - Review - Executive 11 October 2021
- Proposal for a new way of working – Executive 11 October 2021

FAREHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

Executive Briefing Paper	

Date:	07 December 2021
Subject:	Virtual Briefing Meetings
Briefing by:	Head of Democratic Services
Portfolio:	Policy and Resources

INTRODUCTION

1. The coronavirus pandemic has brought about unprecedented changes and long-term affects to several Council Services as well as to the way work is carried out. Between March 2020 and July 2021 our day-to-day operations had to adapt to manage the new ways of working in order to comply with the Government's lockdown guidelines.

2. The purpose of this report is to consider how the speedy introduction of technology to enable virtual meetings could be used to maximise flexibility and efficiency as our organisation implements its vision on a new way of working in the future.

BACKGROUND

3. The Coronavirus Act 2020 was passed by the House of Lords on the 25 March 2020. As well as providing details on local elections and other electoral processes, it also provided clarity to Local Authorities on how to manage many of the Council's statutory functions.

4. Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 outlined details of how Local Authorities could make provision to hold meetings without the need for Members to physically attend. This permitted the Chief Executive Officer to move forward in developing both a temporary decision-making process and to convene virtual meetings.

5. The Executive Leader took the initiative to set up virtual online briefings for all councillors. This provided an opportunity for Elected Members to be briefed by the Executive Leader and Chief Executive Officer and to ask questions and raise issues. Following the first national lockdown, these changed to briefings on a political group basis.

6. In addition, managers were encouraged to hold virtual team meetings with groups of employees, and individuals, on a regular basis to ensure that staff did not feel isolated and were well informed of developments taking place across the Council.

7. It is clear that the availability of Microsoft Teams technology made a major contribution to the way that the Council could continue to operate during the pandemic. The technology enabled councillors to participate in public meetings from the safety of their home. Live streaming of meetings to the public also avoided the need for the public to physically attend meetings.

8. The decision to allow deputations to be made in writing, or by video or audio clip proved to be popular and it has been agreed that this facility be retained in the future, subject to the separate deputation scheme for the Planning Committee being kept under review.

FUTURE PROPOSALS

9. At its meeting on 11 October 2021 the Executive considered a report by the Chief Executive Officer to review of the Council's approach to Pandemic. As part of this review, the Executive were presented with actions which would see Covid response activities developed as future initiatives to retain good examples of new ways of working across various Council services. Within this report was a recommendation to establish clear protocols on virtual briefing meetings.

10. It is suggested that the following types of meetings are held using virtual technology:

    - Director / Portfolio Holder Meetings
    - Chairman Briefings
    - Executive Briefings
    - CX / Mayor Council Briefings
    - Welborne Briefings
    - Daedalus Briefings
    - Member Working Groups

    This list of meetings is not exhaustive, and this approach of virtual meetings applies to any and all similar informal Officer/Member meetings. It does not include formal meetings under the committee system (i.e. Executive, Scrutiny Panels, Council and Committee meetings)

11. It is possible to hold Individual Executive Member decisions via a virtual Teams Meeting but this should only be set up in agreement with the decision maker and if there are no deputations and no requests from the public to observe the decision being taken.

12. In certain circumstances it may be necessary or preferable to hold a physical meeting in which case this can be arranged in advance if all participants are in agreement, but the default arrangement should be to hold a virtual meeting.

13. If it is convenient to do so, physical meetings may be arranged if the date and time coincides with a scheduled committee meeting at which the Elected Member will be physically present.

14. It is important to note that there will still be plenty of opportunities for people to mix at physical meetings due to the range of committee, panel, executive, full council and group meetings which will remain as in person meetings.

<u>Factors against continuing with virtual meetings</u>

15. Participants of a physical meeting can often rely on body language and non-verbal communication to pick up unspoken reactions in others to assess if the message being communicated is being understood.

16. Rapport and team bonding can be important factors in establishing and building upon trust, which is easier to achieve when all participants are physically in the room.

17. It may be possible for other people in the household or office to overhear briefings and discussions when virtual meetings are held using a speaker. This could lead to information being leaked outside of the organisation before it is intended to be released into the public domain.

<u>Factors in favour of continuing with virtual meetings</u>

18. There are environmental benefits to keeping Officer/Member briefings as virtual meetings in the future as they reduce the need for car travel. Less commuting means fewer single passenger journeys on the local roads, which will contribute to reduced congestion and improved air quality.

19. To help mitigate the worst effects of Climate Change, the Council has made a commitment to becoming carbon neutral and has adopted a Climate Change Action Plan. Within this action plan, one of the short-term commitments is to reduce the Council's Carbon Footprint by "pursuing meetings and seminars online to reduce unnecessary travel".

20. The vision for a new way of working includes an expectation to see fewer people in the Civic Offices or Broadcut Offices on a daily basis as the flexibility to request a different work pattern will replace the traditional 9 to 5 in the office working pattern.

21. Virtual meetings are clearly more efficient in terms of time management as there is no requirement for Members to spend time travelling to the Civic Offices.

22. Some Elected Members also have full time jobs and virtual meetings are easier for them to diarise and will take less time away from their employer by virtue of not needing to factor in travelling time.

23. It is planned to provide Members with better ICT equipment in the near future which will allow easy access and good functionality for virtual meetings.

<u>Virtual Meeting Protocols</u>

24. During the period of the pandemic when virtual committee meetings were held, protocol emails were sent to all Members and Officers before each meeting. Guidance documents were also developed to assist Members, Officers and the public in accessing meetings.

25. A new draft protocol has been drawn up to provide guidance for the implementation of virtual briefing meetings and this is included at Appendix A.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

26. There are no direct costs associated with the delivery of this proposal as the technology to enable virtual meetings is provided as part of the Microsoft Office package.

27. It is possible that a small reduction in costs may be realised as holding more virtual meetings is likely to result in a reduction in travel costs for mileage claims under the Members' Allowances Scheme.

CONCLUSION

28. In embracing lessons learnt during the COVID pandemic, it is recommended that where possible, all future Officer/Member briefings, meetings and training sessions should be delivered via Microsoft Teams.

Enquiries:

For further information on this report please contact Leigh Usher, Head of Democratic Services. (Ext 4553)

Protocol for Virtual Meetings

1. The following meetings are to be held using MS Teams:

   - Director / Portfolio Holder Meetings
   - Chairman Briefings
   - Executive Briefings
   - CX / Mayor Council Briefings
   - Welborne Briefings
   - Daedalus Briefings
   - Member Working Groups

   This list of meetings is not exhaustive, and this approach of virtual meetings applies to any and all similar informal Officer/Member meetings. It does not include formal meetings under the committee system (i.e. Executive, Scrutiny Panels, Council and Committee meetings)

2. It is possible to hold Individual Executive Member decisions via a virtual Teams Meeting but this should only be set up in agreement with the decision maker and if there are no deputations and no requests from the public to observe the decision being taken.

3. In certain circumstances it may be necessary or preferable to hold a physical meeting in which case this can be arranged in advance if all participants are in agreement but the default arrangement should be to hold a virtual meeting.

4. If it is convenient to do so, physical meetings may be arranged if the date and time coincides with a scheduled committee meeting at which the Elected Member will be physically present.

During the meeting

5. All attendees should use the FBC branded background (or if not available a blurred background).

6. Attendees should use headphones if there are other people within earshot of the computer or laptop in use whether at home or in the office.

7. The "hands up" function should be used to indicate that you wish to speak.

8. Please be aware that the chat function can be used but that all information contained within the chat is subject to FOI requests.

9. Attendees should keep their microphones off until you are called to speak.