
Report To:	Policy & Resources Committee	Date:	24 March 2020
Report By:	Head of Legal & Property Services	Report No:	LP/043/20
Contact Officer:	Gerard Malone	Contact No:	01475 712710
Subject:	COVID-19 (Coronavirus): Proposed Temporary Arrangements for Committee Meetings		

1.0 PURPOSE

1.1 This report is submitted relative to Item 11 on this Committee's agenda and, as an update, proposes temporary arrangements for future Committee meetings in the light of current circumstances.

2.0 SUMMARY

2.1 The Council has a robust decision-making process through its Committee system which is underpinned by the Council's key governance documentation. These processes are kept under constant review to ensure they are up-to-date and fit for purpose.

2.2 For the duration of the current COVID-19 circumstances, it is suggested that temporary arrangements be approved to allow Elected Members, at their option and personal discretion, to participate in and vote at Committee meetings by means of conference telephone. Although Elected Members will wish to continue to attend Committee meetings in person, where possible, this report proposes that, in circumstances where individual Councillors may need to self-isolate or otherwise minimise their public engagements, telephone conference facilities be authorised in order to allow them to participate in ongoing Council business.

2.3 This report asks that Elected Members support the temporary suspension of Standing Orders for the period of the COVID-19 circumstances so that participation in and voting at Committee meetings may be varied to permit attendance by telephone conference, subject to the details set out in this report.

3.0 RECOMMENDATION

3.1 That Members confirm their general agreement to the suspension of Standing Orders for the duration of the COVID-19 circumstances to permit attendance at all of the Council's Committees, Sub-Committees and Boards by telephone conference, subject to the details set out in this report.

Gerard Malone
Head of Legal & Property Services

4.0 BACKGROUND

- 4.1 COVID-19 is having a widespread and significant effect on all communities. In the current circumstances, it is prudent to plan for significant impacts on all aspects of local authority business. This report proposes an option for Members, where needed, for temporary arrangements for Committee meetings for the duration of COVID-19.
- 4.2 The Council has a robust and tried and tested decision-making process. Its Committee system is underpinned by the Council's key governance documents, the Standing Orders and Scheme of Administration, the Scheme of Delegation to Officers, the Standing Orders relating to Contracts and the Financial Regulations. All of the Council's governance documents are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that they are relevant and fit for purpose.
- 4.3 In view of the current COVID-19 circumstances, it is prudent to plan for any potential impacts on the ability of Elected Members to be able to participate in and scrutinise the Council's business. This report proposes temporary arrangements to approve the use of telephone conference facilities to assist Elected Members in participating in and voting on vital items of Committee business.

5.0 TELEPHONE CONFERENCE PROPOSAL

- 5.1 Standing Orders require that all meetings of the Council are held within the Municipal Buildings, Greenock. There is provision that any Member who cannot reasonably attend a meeting in person may request that provision be made within alternative, suitable Council premises for video conferencing participation in the meeting. These arrangements can be put in place for any meeting. However, it is proposed these arrangements be extended to telephone conferencing facilities for the duration of COVID-19.
- 5.2 The proposal is that :–
- Elected Members be permitted to participate in and vote at all relevant Committee, Sub-Committee and Boards by telephone conference;
 - telephone conference facilities can accommodate up to 15 incoming lines;
 - the Elected Members using this option must confirm in advance that the venue from which they are telephoning is in a secure and private environment for purposes of any exempt or confidential information that is discussed at the meeting; and
 - the termination of these temporary arrangements will be formally intimated to Elected Members by notice from me (upon consultation with the Chief Executive and other relevant Officers of the Council).
- 5.3 It is understood that many Elected Members will wish to continue to attend meetings in person. These arrangements are being proposed in order to assist Members if they are in a situation of required self-isolation or if they wish to minimise any travel or public contact which may affect them or their families during the course of the COVID-19 circumstances.
- 5.4 Meetings that are held in these temporary circumstances will require a very brief protocol to ensure effective meeting arrangements and these will include:

General Conference Guidance

- please use landlines for phoning in as they are less likely to cause interference;
- for any mobile phone use, please avoid any known areas of low signal;
- meeting participants by telephone should mute their line/device to minimise any noise disruption when they are not contributing;
- the Convener will seek to open the meeting conference line shortly prior to the start time and Elected Members calling in will be requested also to call in shortly before the meeting start time in order to minimise any disruption after meeting commencement; and,
- the Convener will seek to prompt all discussion in order to take account of phone line participation and this may assist in avoiding interruptions.

- 5.5 The above proposals are suggested as a reasonable and proportionate response to the needs of continuing Committee business during the COVID-19 circumstances. Elected Members are asked in this report to agree to the general suspension of Standing Orders in order to facilitate these arrangements. In so doing, the arrangements can be put in place, if approved, without the necessity of a full Council meeting (which for obvious reasons is not being suggested as a route at this time).
- 5.6 The proposals are summarised as giving all Elected Member phone participants the same entitlement to debate and vote on any item of business as if that Member were present in the Council Chamber.
- 5.7 Separately from the above temporary proposals, Members can be assured that Officers will be especially rigorous in this period in identifying and submitting reports so there is focus on key business items and Conveners are requested to ask all participating Members for their cooperation in implementing these arrangements.
- 5.8 There are, additionally, robust emergency authorisation procedures already in place for reports that require urgent action and these involve Conveners, Vice Conveners and relative Members of the Minority Groups, dependent upon the nature of the Committee business to be transacted, and all subject to committee scrutiny, thereafter. The Policy and Resources Executive Sub-Committee is authorised to exercise the powers of the Policy and Resources Committee and all thematic committees in circumstances of urgency.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Finance

Financial Implications:

One off Costs

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	Budget Years	Proposed Spend this Report	Virement From	Other Comments
N/A					

Annually Recurring Costs/ (Savings)

Cost Centre	Budget Heading	With Effect from	Annual Net Impact	Virement From (If Applicable)	Other Comments
N/A					

6.2 Legal

There are not legal implications beyond the issues noted in this report.

6.3 Human Resources

There are no HR implications arising from this report.

6.4 Equalities

Equalities

- (a) Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out?

YES (see attached appendix)

X	NO – This report does not introduce a new policy, function or strategy or recommend a substantive change to an existing policy, function or strategy. Therefore, no Equality Impact Assessment is required
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(b) Fairer Scotland Duty

If this report affects or proposes any major strategic decision:-

Has there been active consideration of how this report's recommendations reduce inequalities of outcome?

	YES – A written statement showing how this report's recommendations reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage has been completed.
X	NO

(c) Data Protection

Has a Data Protection Impact Assessment been carried out?

	YES – This report involves data processing which may result in a high risk to the rights and freedoms of individuals.
X	NO

6.5 Repopulation

There are no repopulations implications arising from this report.

7.0 CONSULTATIONS

7.1 The Chief Executive has been consulted on this report.

8.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

8.1 None