



Committee and Date

Council
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Item

Public

Paper v Digital Agendas

**Responsible
Officer**

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1. Synopsis

This report considers the proposal to significantly limit the provision of paper copies of meeting agendas and reports and the continuation of live streaming of meetings.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The Council can legally hold paperless meetings and this is in line with the Council's Organisational Principles. The benefits are:
- it reduces our carbon footprint;
 - it improves access to and the retrieval of data at any time;
 - it improves security; and
 - saves valuable time and resources.
- 2.2. The Council continues to live stream meetings following the return to face to face meetings in May 2021. There are significant benefits and a public expectation to continue doing so.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. Council is recommended:
- 3.1.1. to agree that paper copies of agendas and reports should not routinely be provided for meetings and IT support will be provided to enable Members to access digital copies of agendas and reports subject to:
- (a) any specific requests by Members for a paper copy of the summons for a meeting to be posted to their home address.

- (b) any specific requests by Chairs of Committees for a paper copy of the agenda but not the full set of reports where a second screen is available when chairing the meeting.
- (c) Copies of reports provided to members will be recorded and costs and carbon savings published annually.

3.1.2. To agree to amend paragraph 9.2 of Part of the Councils Constitution as follows:

"9.2 Contents of the Summons

The Summons will give the date, time and place of each meeting and specify the business to be transacted. When sent electronically it will be accompanied by such reports as are available. When sent by post, such reports as are available will be sent separately by electronic means unless agreed by the Assistant Director of Legal and Democratic Services that they should be provided in paper form.

- 3.2. to agree that meetings of Council, Cabinet and committees should continue to be live streamed in accordance with the processes that have been in place since the return to face to face meetings in May 2021

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. The recommendations in this report are compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998. There are no direct adverse equalities or environmental consequence arising from this report. Reduction of paper reports reduces the risk of inadvertent disclosure of confidential information in exempt reports. Live streaming meetings has the potential to increase transparency of and access to meetings for those who might have protected characteristics that mean it is harder to attend physical meetings. Climate change implications are considered below.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. Reducing the use of paper reports saves the costs of paper and printing as set out in Appendix 2 to this report. It also saves on staff time, and postage, as well as disposal costs. Some staff time will be required on an on-going basis to support Members in improving IT skills to make the most of using digital reports, but no new additional staff resource is considered necessary.
- 5.2. Live streaming meetings does not have obvious financial benefits to the Council and does take IT staff time. To facilitate effective streaming main meeting rooms need appropriate IT infrastructure which is already in place in some. Upgrading the Council Chamber to this level and to continue to use it effectively as a meeting space would cost an additional £80,000 but

much of it could be utilised in any future civic space. Some saving may be made in members expenses if Members who do not have to be present in a meeting but otherwise might have wanted to attend to observe can do so via a live stream instead of travelling to attend in person. Avoiding the need to travel does have financial benefits for others including the press and public.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1 *Energy and fuel consumption:* The paper, printing and distribution of printed material associated with Council agendas and meetings has a significantly higher carbon footprint than the electronic email equivalent. Research suggests that Standard postal letters have an average carbon footprint of around 30g, so distributing large amounts of paper such as a meeting agenda and papers (up to 200 sheets of paper) could generate a footprint of several kilograms for each member for each meeting. Whilst text-only emails generate a carbon footprint of only 4g, the inclusion of multiple attachments can increase this significantly to around 50g. The overall footprint of emailing meeting agendas and papers is therefore considerably less than the postal equivalent.
- 6.2 Virtual meetings also generate significant carbon savings. Travel analysis suggests that each virtual full Council meeting can save over 0.5 tonnes of carbon from avoided travel in private cars from home addresses to Shrewsbury. For councillors not members of a specific committee, they have the option to view the live stream rather than travelling to the meeting, and it is estimated that if 10% of members did this, it would save approximately 50kg of carbon per meeting. Reducing the demand for in person attendance by the public and press at meetings by the availability of live streaming will also generate carbon savings.
- 6.3 *Renewable energy generation:* Electronic distribution of meeting agendas and virtual meetings are not expected to have any direct implications for the generation of renewable energy;
- 6.4 *Carbon offsetting or mitigation:* Electronic distribution of meeting agendas and virtual meetings are not expected to have any direct implications for the capture and storage of carbon to mitigate the effects of climate change, separate to those already being developed as part of the implementation of the Council's corporate climate strategy;
- 6.5 *Climate Change adaptation:* Electronic distribution of meeting agendas and virtual meetings will enhance the extent to which Council services are resilient in the face of the challenges of more extreme weather events by limiting dependence on postal services and reducing the need to travel.

7. Background

- 7.1. In 2020, the Council's senior leadership team developed ten organisational principles which were endorsed by Cabinet before the May 2021 elections and have been enthusiastically adopted by the new Cabinet and the Leader. Among those were "make digital the preferred way to work", "consider the impact of our activities on the climate" and "provide value for money". With these in mind efforts are ongoing to reduce reliance on paper across the organisation. This is a principle not a policy decision, but

we could work towards this becoming a policy as part of our response to our declared Climate Change Emergency.

- 7.2. So far as Council reports are concerned this is not a new aspiration. The former Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council had developed an incremental approach to moving to paperless meetings and from 2006 were sending reports to members via email and laptops and display screens in meetings to reduce reliance on paper. Shropshire County Council was reducing the circulation of paper copies beyond immediate attendees since 2005. Other Councils are also embracing this direction of travel – see Appendix 2.
- 7.3. The impact of printing on paper is huge; in 2019 the Council printed 7,900,813 sides of paper. Since the increased use of digital methods and new ways of working over the pandemic this reduced to 2,900,635, a decrease of 63%. Printed committee reports are, at best, referred to a number of times and stored for future reference, and at worst, not read and disposed of (and may not even be recycled). Staff time is taken up printing, despatching and then collecting up and disposing of paper copies. This has a time and cost effect. Where reports include exempt items there is also a clear risk to confidentiality in that paper copies can and have been left in insecure locations.
- 7.4. The Council has invested significant sums to provide new IT platforms and usable IT kit which will enable sustainable solutions to Council business in a rural authority to be provided in the future. All Members have up to date laptops and were all offered second screens so they have effective IT work stations, and power packs to ensure access is maintained for longer meetings. In meetings second screens are being provided for those chairing. Nevertheless, the impact of our activities on climate change can be aided by the wholesale adoption of new practices.
- 7.5. Council reports are being changed. The focus is on shorter, focussed reports viewable with ease on laptops and other digital devices. Reports viewed digitally as PDFs can be annotated and highlighted in a number of ways. Training will be provided to enable Members and Officers to annotate, highlight, query and question reports for their own purposes. These notes and annotations can then be stored for the individuals' future reference. Viewing reports digitally allows users to make the text larger to aid viewing.
- 7.6. As Members are aware, when the pandemic hit, changes were made to legislation to allow Council meetings and Committee meetings to take place virtually until May 2021. By live streaming the meetings it was possible to view them virtually, meaning members of the public could view the business of the Council from wherever they were without the need to travel. When face to face meetings resumed because the legislation allowing them not to be face to face expired, the Council continued to live stream the meetings. This enabled access meetings while numbers present were physically limited due to pandemic restrictions, and social distancing room limits.

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. Legally Councils may hold entirely paperless meetings. In 2015 new legislation (Local Government (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2015) was introduced meaning that Councils are now be able to hold entirely paperless committee meetings. The explanatory memorandum to that Order confirmed members could still request a copy of the summons only in paper and that each Authority should decide with their members what works best for them. Since 2015, the use of electronic methods of communication and doing business, and the need to reduce costs and waste have increased.
- 8.2. The legal requirements regarding meeting papers are set out in Appendix 1 to this report. As stated, members may still request a copy of a meeting summons in paper form. By law, the summons need only “specify the business to be transacted” (i.e. the agenda) and this does not include copies of all the reports, although reports do have to be open to inspection at the offices of the Council. Legally, copies of reports can be requested subject to payment of a fee.
- 8.3. The Council’s Constitution at paragraph 9.2, Part 4 (Council Procedure Rules) sets out that a meeting Summons will be accompanied by such reports as are available. This is not a legal requirement and therefore to support the approach in this report it is recommended that the Constitution is amended to state that reports will be provided electronically unless specifically agreed by the Assistant Director Legal and Democratic Services.
- 8.4. IT support is in place for Members, and this includes a separate phone number for Members and IT business partners who have assisted throughout the pandemic as we have all made significant progress adapting to new technologies including a year of holding solely virtual meetings. This is an achievement by all concerned that would have seemed unthinkable 2 years ago. Placed in this context, relying on digital papers for meetings is a logical progression. Using digital technologies to access papers gives Members more experience of new technologies, increases skills and understanding of technology and how it can transform service delivery. Further support and training can be given for those who need it about how to access and manipulate documents in PDF format so the Members can open individual documents on the agenda separately, read, make notes, highlight and tab digital documents just as you would on a paper copy. While solely virtual decision taking meetings are no longer legally possible after the temporary legislation expired in May 2021 progress with the use of digital technologies can continue. Indeed, national government conducted a call for evidence in early 2021 in order to consider the pros and cons of making the provision allowing for virtual meetings to be permanent. To date it is not apparent that further proposals have yet been made.
- 8.5. The costs of providing paper copies of reports are not insignificant. Appendix 2, Table A sets out the estimated annual costs of printing reports for all the committees of the Council. This does not take account of the costs of the staff time arranging printing and posting, or the costs

and time taken to collect up and dispose of reports after meetings. Nor does it include any printing of reports by members themselves. Since July 2021 requests for paper copies of report packs have been monitored and this is set out in Appendix 2, Table B. As can be seen the requests are from a relatively small minority of Members aside from the Chairs of meetings. It is considered that where Chairs feel they need a paper agenda to Chair effectively, this could be provided so they can use their screens to view the reports. However, moving forward a full paper copy of the reports should not be routinely provided for Chairs.

- 8.6. Some research has been undertaken into the approach being taken by other Councils. Where reports referencing the issue were located, they were considered and some recorded meetings were viewed to get a sense of how Councils are working. That information is set out in Appendix 2, Table C. It is apparent that there is significant disparity at present but generally there appears to be a clear direction of travel towards a paperless approach for reasons including cost, time and carbon reduction, and Shropshire Council has the opportunity to be at the forefront of this.
- 8.7. The Council has continued live streaming meetings since May 2021. It is not currently a legal requirement to do so. However, it is considered that this has several benefits. It is transparent and enables the public to view the meeting from wherever they are and so reduces the need to travel. This is particularly beneficial in a large rural county like Shropshire. It is recognised that there are areas of the county where the broadband is less good but it is still possible for residents to travel to somewhere to access broadband that is closer to them without travelling to Shirehall to attend a meeting in person. While Shirehall is not open to the public, live streaming reduces the demand for in-person attendance making managing attendees less onerous for facilities and democratic services staff. While covid-19 continues to pose a risk and public health advice is to limit contact, fewer numbers attending meetings reduces the risk for those Members and staff who do have to be physically present. Wherever a meeting is held there will always be some limits on the numbers who can attend in person because of the constraints of the venue, regardless of covid or other limiting factors. Ensuring meetings are live streamed maximises the numbers who can see and hear the business of the Council being conducted regardless of any physical constraints of the location of the meeting.
- 8.8. While there may be some concerns about streaming of meetings being available on the internet, members are elected to public office, their names and photographs are available publicly in any event and members of the public do already have the right to record and film meetings. The Council has demonstrated that it has the capability to live stream meetings, this is plainly adding to transparency and arguably the public may now have a legitimate expectation that this should continue. It is recognised that where a meeting is expected to be livestreamed, if there are technical difficulties with doing so, the meeting may need to be delayed to avoid prejudice being caused to those who would otherwise have travelled to attend. It is considered that in the event that it is not immediately possible to live stream the meeting those viewing/listening remotely but not directly participating would not be prejudiced so long as a recording of the meeting is made available on the Council's website shortly thereafter.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. There are significant positive benefits from reducing reliance on paper reports and agendas in meetings in line with the Council's organisational principles. Members and officers have the necessary IT equipment and support to enable them to access the material necessary to participate in meetings. Accordingly, this should be endorsed by Council as the preferred approach in line with the recommendations of this report.
- 9.2. Live streaming also has significant positive benefits and ensures transparency for the public and as such should be supported and maintained in the future.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Rob Gittins

Local Member: All

Appendices

Appendix 1: Legal requirements - meeting agendas and reports

Appendix 2: Background Information