

Governance and Ethics Committee

24 November 2022

Report title	Introduction of Paperless Committee Meetings	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Paula Brookfield Cabinet Member for Governance and Equalities	
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Originating service	Democratic Services	
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Report to be/has been considered by		

Recommendations for decision:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to:

1. Approve that Council adopt a “paperless” approach to meetings i.e. that Council approves the electronic delivery, by default, of all Council and Committee / Panel meeting papers with paper copies being provided only by exception (e.g. medical reasons/visual impairments/hidden disabilities, these requirements will be catered for.). Chairs and Vice Chairs can also opt to receive paper copies.
2. Approve that Councillors can use their Council issued devices and the functionality of Modern.Gov to access papers.
3. Approve that Councillors who receive posted paper copies for Scrutiny meetings collect papers from their pigeonholes on the third floor.
4. Approve that papers are only posted to members of committees and panels who are external to the organisation – if requested, otherwise they will be shared electronically.
5. Approve that the Council have two hard copy agendas for viewing by the public at any such meeting.

Recommendations for noting:

The Governance and Ethics Committee is recommended to note:

1. That officers continue to support Councillors in the understanding and operation of their devices and the Modern.Gov app.
2. That officers will create online user guides and video tutorials for Councillors to access via the Councillor Portal to use Modern.Gov efficiently.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an update on how Councillors access committee papers (please note this covers papers produced by both Democratic Services and Scrutiny), and the costs associated with receiving paper copies.
- 1.2 To consider the impact on climate change and a proposal on adopting a paperless approach.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Local Government Act 1972 and the Local Government (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 set out the legal provisions governing the requirement to make available agendas and minutes of Council and committee meetings and Executive meetings both to Councillors and to the public.
- 2.2 The Council currently provides, and delivers papers via royal mail or a courier, printed copies of Council and committee agendas to all Councillors (or substitute members where appointed) of the committees to which they have been appointed. Spare copy agendas (approximately 4 per meeting) are also printed and made available for Councillors, press and public.
- 2.3 Following a request at the last Councillor Development and Information Technology Advisory Group, Councillor preferences were checked with all members by the Political Assistants.
 - 24 Councillors have requested digital only access to papers
 - 36 Councillors request paper copies, of which 4 Councillors stated they have health related reasons for paper copies being required, which the Council are committed to supporting.

3.0 Paperless Meetings background and proposal

- 3.1 Wolverhampton significantly reduced its own paper dependence in 2014, having migrated to the modern.gov application.
- 3.2 In November 2019, Governance and Ethics Committee considered a paper on 'Introduction of Paperless Committee Meetings'. The committee approved to undertake a pilot of 'paperless' meetings and, subject to the success of the pilot, to extend this approach to all Council and Committee meetings on a phased basis.
- 3.3 During the Covid-19 emergency, the pilot was put on hold. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic in May 2020 till May 2021 all committee meetings took place virtually. The service received feedback from some Councillors, advising of the difficulty at home to view the meeting and review papers – therefore demand for paper copies increased.

4.0 Advantages of Paperless Working

4.1 There are a number of potential benefits associated with a move to paperless meetings, which include:

Climate Emergency

4.2 The Council declared a Climate Change emergency on Wednesday 17 July 2019. The primary benefit of paperless meetings is the reduction of the Council's carbon footprint, highlighting the authority as being environmentally responsible. Paper and stationery usage is reduced, less energy is used to produce printed papers and less transport is involved.

4.3 On 16 September 2020, Council approved the 'Our Climate Commitment' document. In it we set out how we will deliver our commitment to make the City of Wolverhampton Council carbon neutral by 2028 and deliver upon the promises we made when we declared a climate emergency at Full Council in 2019.

4.4 On 28 July 2021, Cabinet approved 'Climate Change - 2028 Net Zero Action Plan Approvals'. The action plan is a long-term approach to tackling climate change in order to achieve net zero ambitions by 2028.

4.5 Reducing paper consumption will mitigate (reduce) the impacts of climate change by;

- lowering the greenhouse gas emissions generated by processing pulp into paper.
- saving water - water is used in every stage of paper production, such as pulp making, processing, and paper manufacturing, plus the associated activities of cooking, bleaching, and washing,
- using less paper individually will reduce the amount of paper being transported overall, thereby reducing carbon emissions.
- reducing the amount of waste lessening the amount of material sent to landfills.

Postage and Printing Costs.

4.6 Each time a Committee is held, paper copies are produced for those Councillors who have elected to receive paper copies of Committee papers. At present papers are posted to external attendees and to some members of Scrutiny Panels. Papers are made available in pigeonholes for collection for the majority of meetings.

4.7 The costs associated with printing and posting Council and Committee papers vary each year with the number of meetings held and the size of agendas and individual reports, but have consistently been just over £10,000 annually.

Driven by Digital

- 4.8 A key principle of the Our City: Our Plan is being driven by digital. The city is at the forefront of digital infrastructure and innovation. Moving to paperless meetings provides Councillors with an opportunity to lead by example in this regard and demonstrate that they too are prepared to embrace new forms of technology to deliver savings, embrace more efficient working practices and reduce the Council's carbon footprint.

Security

- 4.9 The Modern.Gov app will enable Democratic Services to disseminate Private or Restricted (Exempt Information) papers securely to Councillors. This has the benefit of ensuring that only the people who should see the papers have access to them.

Improved Access to Information

- 4.10 Through the Modern.Gov app, Councillors are able to access meeting papers from any place, at any time to suit their personal commitments. Most tablet devices are small, portable, convenient and easy to use once Councillors become familiar with them; by contrast some agenda packs can be several hundred pages long and particularly cumbersome.
- 4.11 The Modern.Gov app can be set to retain six months' worth of Committee papers which can be accessed and referred to at any time (including during meetings), improving access to information. At the current time Councillors only receive a hard copy agenda for the Committees on which they sit; however, the app can be configured to provide Councillors with access to any Council meeting papers they wish to receive.
- 4.12 The Modern.Gov app has a range of annotation tools to allow Councillors and employees to make notes, highlight sections etc. as required.

5.0 Support for Councillors

- 5.1 It is recognised that some Councillors will adapt quicker than others to a transition to paperless meetings, therefore the high standard of support provided to them will be crucial.
- 5.2 The IT & Digital team who support Councillors will ensure that all Councillors are content with the IT equipment they have and that it is fit for purpose.
- 5.3 It is also proposed that, in order to put Councillors at ease with using the Modern.Gov app, ongoing drop-in sessions will be held prior to Committee meetings to deliver high quality one-to-one support and advice. Support will also be requested from Digital & IT to ensure that the Councillor Wi-Fi facility is regularly tested for reliability (although as long as the agenda pack is downloaded before the meeting, a weak or intermittent Wi-Fi signal should not affect Councillor participation at meetings).

6.0 Principles

6.1 To ensure paperless committees are successfully implemented the following core principles will be adopted:

- Chair's and Vice Chairs will be provided with a copy of papers.
- Councillors who may have an accessibility issue (medical reasons/visual impairments/hidden disabilities) will be provided with a copy of papers.
- Officers will endeavour to produce all reports in a form that can be used on a device. It is acknowledged that there will be some exceptions and, in such instances, paper copies will be produced to aid their readability.
- That Councillors participate in training from Democratic Services so that they are able to take advantage of the various means of annotation that the modern.gov app offers.
- That Councillors who are experts with the Modern.gov app provide peer to peer support.

7.0 Financial implications

7.1 The costs associated with printing and posting Council and Committee papers vary each year with the number of meetings held and the size of agendas and individual reports, but have consistently been just over £10,000 annually. Though paper copies will still be provided by exception the adoption of a paperless approach to meetings by default is anticipated to reduce spend significantly from this level. [GE/15112022/Z]

8.0 Legal implications

8.1 Consideration has been given to the Local Government Act 1972 – (specifically those sections relating to Access to Information), the Local Government Act 2000.

8.2 The Local Government (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2015 permits delivery of an electronic summons to Councillors for a Committee meeting subject to the consent of the Councillor.

8.3 The security settings within the Modern.Gov App allow for all common types of information to be published securely, safeguarding sensitive documents and applying where necessary the exemption criteria relevant to Access to Information legislation. [SZ/16112022/P]

9.0 Equalities implications

9.1 The Council recognises that Councillors with hidden disabilities, such as dyslexia or visual impairment, may require additional support and all appropriate measures will be put in place.

10.0 All other Implications

10.1 The Council declared a Climate Change emergency on Wednesday 17 July 2019. The primary benefit of paperless meetings is the reduction of the Council's carbon footprint, highlighting the authority as being environmentally responsible. Paper and stationery

usage is reduced, less energy is used to produce printed papers and less transport is involved.

11.0 Schedule of background papers

11.1 [Introduction of Paperless Committee Meetings, Governance and Ethics Committee, 15 November 2019](#)

12.0 Appendices

12.1 None