

Democratic Governance – Covid19 Recovery Action Plan

1. Remote meetings solution

A remote meetings solution was implemented by 27 May, when the first meeting was broadcast live. By making use of technology already available to the council and because of work undertaken pre-Covid19 to enable agile working for both Councillors and officers it has been possible to implement a remote meetings solution at no financial cost to the council. Working with our IT partner Civica, the Democratic and Electoral Services Team designed and tested the necessary processes, produced guides for all participants, provided training to Councillors and officers, and finalised arrangements for live public participation. Alongside this, the necessary constitutional changes were drafted and the council's approach was publicised on the website and via social media channels. Five months in and the solution continues to work well, with the team providing ongoing support to participants who are less familiar with the technology and, while viewing figures are not high, there has been a good level of public engagement via public questions and representations at Planning Committee.

2. Hybrid meetings

A hybrid meetings solution is not being pursued at present for a number of reasons. The advice received is that Councillors are not classed as workers and therefore the exemption to the Rule of Six that exists for workers does not apply to Councillors. To hold a physical council meeting, either partially or in full, would also be inconsistent with the current guidance that individuals should work from home unless they are unable to do so, as well as the more specific recommendation in the Working Safely During Coronavirus (COVID19) guidance that where public meetings can take place digitally, without the need for face-to-face contact, they should do so. Finally, the council does not have an IT solution in place to support hybrid meetings and to implement one would require a financial investment in order to purchase the necessary hardware and software. While an effective cost-free remote meetings solution remains in place and the council is facing a challenging financial landscape, investing in technology to support a temporary situation is not a priority.

3. Webcasting post-Covid19

Proposals for a webcasting solution for council meetings were rejected in 2018 on cost grounds, however, the provision of cost-free live broadcasting during the pandemic has brought this back on to the agenda. It should be noted that the solution is cost-free because each individual is in a separate location using a device with individual audio-visual functionality and that to reproduce this where some or all individuals are in the same location would require investment in new hardware and software. A full scale hosted solution would still cost in the region of £25-30k plus ongoing costs, and while there may be the possibility of putting together a "workaround" solution using Microsoft Teams, fixed cameras and a sound system, this would not be without a cost. The council could continue to webcast cost-free if the government introduced permanent legislation in respect of remote meeting attendance and the council chose to continue without any physical attendance. In reaching a decision on whether to pursue webcasting post-Covid19, the council should have regard to the viewing figures which range from 0 for some meetings to a high of 37, and the average number of external viewers per meeting is currently 10. However, some caution should be applied to the figures because where viewers have signed in anonymously, it is not possible to tell whether the session IDs relate to unique viewers or repeat viewers leaving and re-joining; the information on identifiable repeat sessions suggests that there may be instances of repeat sessions by the same individuals.

4. May 2021 Elections

While not strictly part of this Recovery Action Plan, elections are a significant democratic event that have been impacted by Covid19, with the Gloucestershire Police and Crime Commissioner, City Council and Quedgeley Town Council elections scheduled for 7 May 2020 all postponed to 6 May 2021. Scheduled elections for Gloucestershire County Council also take place in May 2021, making the combination of polls very challenging, and Gloucester is also the designated Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) authority, which comes with additional responsibilities. The Democratic and Electoral Services Team have commenced their planning early in order to prepare for the additional complications and to ensure that the elections will be delivered in a Covid-secure manner. The booking process for polling stations has begun and recruitment of staff is in the early stages. At this stage, of those external staff who have responded, over 90% have indicated their willingness to work in May. As usual, we will also use our internal staff to fill roles and have asked those not in a high risk group to be prepared to replace anyone who has to self-isolate at short notice. In all aspects of the planning and delivery of the elections, the safety of our staff and electors will be paramount and we will be following any directions or guidance issued by the Cabinet Office and the Electoral Commission.