



Title of Report:	Council's Standing Orders
Committee Report Submitted To:	Corporate Policy and Resources Committee
Date of Meeting:	22nd March 2022
For Decision or For Information	For Decision

Linkage to Council Strategy (2021-25)	
Strategic Theme	Cohesive Leadership/Improvement and Innovation
Outcome	Providing effective, accessible and sustainable local public services
Lead Officer	Director of Corporate Services

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	
Included in Current Year Estimates	YES/NO
Capital/Revenue	
Code	
Staffing Costs	

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	Yes/No	Date:
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date:
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date:

1.0 Introduction

The purpose of the report is to present two matters for Corporate Policy and Resources Committee consideration in relation to [Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council's Standing Orders](#).

The matters are set out as:

- i) A previously agreed amendment to Council's Standing Orders, Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee, Annex D and proceed to update the document;
- ii) To consider the review of Standing Order 2, Time and Place of Meetings, following Council's decision to approve no change to the provision of Standing Order 2 in October 2021, following Council's initial decision to amend in June 2021.

2.0 Background – Standing Order, Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee, Annex D

2.1 At its Planning Committee meeting held 23 February 2022, Committee resolved to amend The Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee, Annex D within Council's Standing Orders, and this took effect from 2 March 2022 (attached Appendix 1).

2.2 The key changes relate to:

- The Planning Committee Reports will now be circulated to Planning Committee Members one week prior to the Planning Committee meeting.
- Removal of reference to when a member should not vote on an application; this is a matter of the Member to determine.
- Deferred applications returning to Committee for determination – presentations should focus on the new issues not previously presented to Committee.
- The deadline for those wishing to register to speak on a planning application at Planning Committee, in line with the requirements of section 6.4 of the Protocol, is amended to 10am on the Monday prior to the Planning Committee meeting on which they wish to speak. Note that for those applications deferred and brought back to a subsequent Planning Committee meeting for determination, those who have not registered to speak when the application was previously before the Committee cannot register to speak at any subsequent meeting that the application is being determined at.

- Reminder that lobbying of Members of the Planning Committee is not permitted.

2.3 Standing Order 2, Time and Place of Meetings

2.4 The matter is now before Elected Members for review, in line with Council's previous decisions. At its meeting held 5 October 2021, it was resolved that Council:

a) notes that the Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2020 come into effect again from 27 August 2021 and;

b) having reviewed Standing Order 2, approves no change to the provisions of the Standing Order which state that 'The Annual Meeting and other meetings of the Council shall normally be held at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, or in remote or hybrid format, except where otherwise fixed by statute or by special summons', subject to review in March 2022.

2.5 Standing Order 2 currently states that 'The Annual Meeting and other meetings of the Council shall normally be held at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, or in remote or hybrid format, except where otherwise fixed by statute or by special summons.'

2.6 Department for Communities (DfC) Call for Evidence on Northern Ireland Councils - Remote/Hybrid Meetings

2.7 There was no express provision for remote meetings for district councils in Northern Ireland pre-pandemic. The Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2020 which came into operation following the introduction of the Coronavirus Act 2020, made provision for councils in Northern Ireland to hold meetings before 7 May 2021 remotely (such as through digital conferencing software or telephone conference) so that they could protect their members and comply with public health guidance. Subsequently, the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Act 2021, which came into force on 27 August 2021, extended those regulations until the date that section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 is due to expire (currently 24 March 2022). As district councils in Northern Ireland have now had extensive experience of conducting remote meetings over the past year, DfC issued a call for evidence to give an opportunity to understand these experiences and inform a decision about whether to make these arrangements permanent. Any permanent change would require subordinate legislation that would be subject to the agreement of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

2.8 At its meeting held 1 February 2022 Council considered a draft response to the Call for Evidence and, it was resolved that Council:

Issue a Corporate response to the DfC consultation on the Call for Evidence on Northern Ireland Councils – Remote/Hybrid Meetings.

2.9 The Council's response has been attached as Appendix 2 for information.

2.10 At the time of writing this report it is understood that the subordinate legislation required to make the arrangements outlined above permanent will be before the Assembly week commencing 21st March 2022

3.0 Recommendation(s)

It is recommended that Council

i) note the amendment to Council's Standing Orders, Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee, Annex D and update the document (attached Appendix 1).

It is recommended that Council

ii) keep Standing Order 2, Time and Place of Meetings which states 'The Annual Meeting and other meetings of the Council shall normally be held at 7.00 pm in the Council Chamber, or in remote or hybrid format, except where otherwise fixed by statute or by special summons'.

Appendix 1: Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee, Annex D effective 2 March 2022

Appendix 2: CC&GB Council Corporate Response to the Department for Communities (DfC) Consultation - Call for Evidence on Northern Ireland Councils - Remote/Hybrid Meetings

Implementation Date: 02 March 2022

Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, at its Planning Committee meeting held on 23 February 2022, agreed the revised 'Protocol for the Operation of the Planning Committee'. The revised Protocol takes effect on 02 March 2022. This revised document sets out the detailed procedures of the Planning Committee that are not covered by the Council's Standing Orders and Councillors' Code of Conduct but should be read in conjunction with such documents.

1.2 The Protocol covers the following:

- Preliminary Matters
- Remit of the Planning Committee
- Frequency of Meetings
- Referral of Delegated Applications
- Format of the Planning Committee meetings
- Decisions Contrary to Officer Recommendation
- Site Visits
- Return of Applications to Planning Committee
- Pre-Determination Hearings

2.0 Preliminary Matters

2.1 A quorum, as outlined in the Council's standing orders, is required for the Committee to convene.

2.2 The following information will be circulated to Committee Members prior to the monthly Planning Committee meeting:

- A weekly list of all new planning applications received and planning applications decided will be circulated to all Elected Members.
- A list of all contentious delegated planning applications where the decision is ready to issue will be circulated to elected members on a weekly basis. A contentious application is one where the decision is to refuse permission. This list will be circulated to all elected members on the Tuesday of each week and uploaded onto the Council website. Elected Members will have until 10am on the Monday of the following week to request a referral, in accordance with Part B of the 'Scheme of Delegation for the Planning Department, otherwise the decision notice will issue.

- A summary report of performance in the processing of planning applications will be presented to Committee on a quarterly basis.
- All Committee Members will normally be sent the agenda in advance of the meeting with a report on each planning application to be considered at the meeting by the Committee.
- Members of the public must not circulate information directly to Members of the Planning Committee. Members of the Planning Committee are not permitted to advocate for or against or lobby for or against any matter before the Planning Committee when they are determining such matter. This information will only be considered if submitted directly to the Planning Department or via planning@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk
- Updated information received after the agenda has issued will be circulated to Members if such circumstance arises. The Planning Officer shall prepare an addendum report(s) to advise Members about the consideration of any updated information received since the agenda issued that is required to inform a decision. If the information is received after 10am on the Monday prior to the Committee meeting, the Officer will advise Members verbally in respect of same.
- Planning Committee meetings should normally be open to the public.
- Substitute Members shall not be permitted to deputise, unless agreed by both the Chair of the Committee and the Head of Planning, and only in exceptional circumstances.
- Legal representation may be in attendance at Committee.
- All members of Planning Committee must have taken the requisite training for either Member or Chair role before they can sit on the Committee.

3.0 Remit of the Planning Committee

3.1 Development Management

The main role of the Planning Committee is to consider applications made to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council as detailed in the adopted Scheme of Delegation and decide whether or not they should be approved. The decisions of the Planning Committee are taken under full delegated authority and will not go before full council for ratification.

3.2 Development Plan

The Planning Committee's role in relation to the local development plan is to approve the Plan Strategy and Local Policies Plan before it is passed by resolution of the full Council. The Planning Committee should ensure that the local development plan, once adopted, is monitored annually and reviewed every 5 years, giving consideration as to whether there is a need to change the Plan Strategy or Local Policies Plan.

3.3 Enforcement

The Planning Committee shall have an overview role of the enforcement function and officers shall prepare a quarterly report on the enforcement performance (number of cases opened, cases closed, notices issued and convictions obtained). The Planning

Committee can request a report from officers on any enforcement matter but should not make a decision. Officers will exercise discretion when discussing sensitive enforcement matters at the Planning Committee to ensure possible future legal proceedings are not prejudiced.

4.0 Frequency of Planning Committees Meeting

4.1 The Planning Committee will normally meet at least once every calendar month. Additional meetings will be at the discretion of the Chair of the Committee with the consent of the Committee Members. No meeting will take place in the month of July. Meetings will conclude no later than 8pm unless otherwise agreed by Committee Members. Any items on the agenda that have not been considered at that time will be adjourned for consideration at a reconvened meeting.

5.0 Referral of Delegated Applications to Planning Committee

5.1 The Scheme of Delegation, approved at the Planning Committee meeting held 26 February 2020 and agreed with the Department for Infrastructure on 30 March 2020, taking effect from 01 May 2020, includes a procedure which allows for Elected Members and Head of Planning to request that the Planning Committee determines an application rather than it being delegated to Officers. Members of the public will not be able to directly request this procedure. Any referral by an Elected Member of Council's Planning Committee must be based on clearly specified planning grounds. The request should be emailed to planning@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk prior to 10am on the Monday following the issuing of the contentious list. The planning reasons for the referral request will be considered by the Head of Planning or other authorised officer and the Chair of the Planning Committee and/or Vice-Chair following the deadline for receipt of requests. Only those applications that are considered to have sound planning reasons will be agreed to be determined by the Planning Committee. The Elected Member will be advised of the decision on the referral request.

6.0 Format of Planning Committee Meetings

6.1 The Committee meetings will be conducted following the below format:

- Notice of Meeting
- Apologies
- Declaration of Interests
- Approval of minutes of the previous meeting
- Requests for deferral for site visit
- Order of Items and Confirmation of Registered Speakers
- Schedule of Planning Applications
- Reports for Determination and Noting
- Correspondence
- In Committee Items including Legal issues
- AORB

6.2 Declaration of Interests

Members will be required to declare any direct or indirect pecuniary interests or any significant private or personal non-pecuniary interest they have on the agenda items. Members cannot speak or vote on a matter where they have a pecuniary or non-pecuniary interest. Members are required to remove themselves from the Chamber while the Members of the Planning Committee discuss the matter and vote on such. The Member(s) will only be invited back into the Chamber to speak on the application if they have registered to do so in accordance with the rules and must leave again thereafter. Otherwise they must remain outside of the Chamber until invited back prior to consideration of the next agenda item.

6.3 The following procedures will apply for each application:

(i) **Introduction of planning application by the planning officers**

The planning officer presents the application and makes a recommendation on whether the application should be approved, approved with conditions or refused. Plans and photographs may be shown to demonstrate the proposals. Officers can address any issues raised during the course of representations from any deputation and the Committee may seek clarification from officers.

(ii) **Elected Members Questions to Planning Officer**

Members can ask points of clarification from the Officer

(iii) **Representations – Objector(s)**

The Chair will welcome the speaker, including a reminder to keep to planning issues and the allocated time.

The total time allowed for representations from objectors will be a maximum of 5 minutes. Therefore if 2 objectors or more wish to address the Committee the 5 minutes will be split between those speakers. The Chair will ask speakers if they have agreed the allocation of the speaking time. If no agreement is reached, the time will be allocated equally against each speaker. A spokesperson for the objectors may address the Committee on behalf of all objectors. The Chair of the Committee may decide on the day of the meeting to extend the time allowed due to unusual or exceptional circumstances. The maximum time allowed will be an additional 3 minutes.

Speakers are not permitted to display information or circulate documentation at the meeting to Members.

(iv) **Elected Members Questions to Objector(s)**

Elected Members can ask points of clarification/fact from the objector(s).

(v) **Representations on behalf of applicant – applicant, agent and supporter**

The Chair will welcome the speaker, including a reminder to keep to planning issues and the allocated time.

The total time allowed for representations from applicant, agent or supporter will be a maximum of 5 minutes. Therefore if applicant and a supporter(s) wish to

address the Committee the 5 minutes will be split between those speakers. The Chair will ask speakers if they have agreed the allocation of the speaking time. If no agreement is reached, the time will be allocated equally against each speaker. A spokesperson for the supporters may address the Committee on behalf of all supporters. The Chair of the Committee may decide on the day of the meeting to extend the time allowed due to unusual or exceptional circumstances. The maximum time allowed will be an additional 3 minutes.

Speakers are not permitted to display information or circulate documentation at the meeting to Members.

- (vi) Elected Members questions to applicant, agent or supporter**
Elected Members can ask points of clarification/fact from the applicant, agent or supporter(s).

- (vii) Representation by Elected Members of Council, MLA and/or MP**
The Chair will welcome the speaker, including a reminder to keep to planning issues and the allocated time.

The total time allowed for representations by Elected Members of Council, MLA and/or MP will be 5 minutes in support and in objection to an application. Therefore if 2 speakers or more wish to address the Committee one in support and one in objection to the application, they will each have 5 minutes. However, if 2 or more Elected Members wish to address the Committee in support of the application, or 2 or more in objection to the application, the 5 minutes will be split between those speakers. The Chair will ask speakers if they have agreed the allocation of the speaking time. If no agreement is reached, the time will be allocated equally against each speaker. The Chair of the Committee may decide on the day of the meeting to extend the time allowed due to unusual or exceptional circumstances. The maximum time allowed will be an additional 3 minutes.

Speakers are not permitted to display information or circulate documentation at the meeting to Members.

- (viii) Planning Officer's and Consultee comments**
Officer(s) and Consultee representatives can clarify points raised by those who made representations to the Committee and answer any further points of clarification from Members.

- (ix) Elected Members' debate including advice from Officers**
Elected Members debate on the planning issue with the aim of having a constructive discussion on the merits of the planning application.

- (x) Elected Members' decision**
The Chair should ask the Committee if it is ready to vote on the application and provide a reminder of the proposal.

An Officer, and/or Legal Adviser may advise Members on the implication of the vote in either direction.

A Member must make a proposal and this must be seconded by another Member before a vote can be taken. The Chair has the casting vote.

Members can defer consideration of an application to a subsequent meeting for further information, further negotiations or a site visit. The Member proposing the deferral must provide clear planning reasons as to why a deferral is necessary. A proposal for a deferral must be seconded by another Member before being voted on. Consideration of an application should generally only be deferred once.

Members can add conditions to an approval decision or add reasons for refusal to a refusal decision but they cannot amend the application by condition (for example amend the layout or reduce the number of units). Any additional conditions or reasons for refusal must be proposed and seconded before being voted on by Members. Members should be aware of the legal tests for conditions as these can be appealed to the Planning Appeals Commission and challenged through the courts – they should be necessary, enforceable, reasonable and relevant to planning and the development under consideration. The Planning Officer and/or Legal Adviser can provide advice as appropriate and necessary.

The planning reasons for any decision which is made contrary to the Planning Officers' recommendation will be formally recorded in the minutes and a copy placed on file.

6.4 Speaking Rights

All parties wishing to address the Committee on a planning application must register their wish to do so with the Planning Department either in writing to Planning Department, Cloonavin, 66 Portstewart Road, Coleraine BT52 1EY or by emailing planning@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk.

All requests to address the Committee on a planning application must be received by **10am on the Monday immediately prior to the Planning Committee meeting** and must provide their name, whether they are speaking in support or objecting to the application and the planning reference number of the application on which they wish to speak. Only those registered to speak within the timeframe will be allowed to address the Committee either to speak or answer questions.

If the speaker is a Planning Committee Member they can remain in the public gallery during the presentation of the application by the officer and listen to the speakers, however they must leave the Chamber during Members' debate, discussion and voting as to that item.

On occasion where the consideration of an application is deferred by Members to a subsequent Committee meeting, those who have previously registered to speak on that

application will be allowed to address the Committee at the subsequent meeting without the need to register to speak again. Those who did not register to speak when the application was previously before Committee for determine cannot register to speak at any subsequent meeting that the application is being determined at.

Speakers will not be permitted to circulate papers to members at the Committee meeting. Members of the Planning Committee are not permitted to advocate for or against or lobby for or against any matter before the Planning Committee when they are determining such matter.

- 6.5** The Chairperson may:
- (a) Suspend the public's right to speak if he/she considers it necessary to maintain order at the meeting; or,
 - (b) Vary the order of representations if he/she feels that it is convenient and necessary and will assist the Committee in dealing with the matter provided that it will not cause prejudice to the parties concerned or the administration of the application.
 - (c) Vary the order of applications if he/she feels that it is convenient and necessary and will assist the Committee in dealing with the matter provided it will not cause prejudice to the parties concerned or the administration of the application.
- 6.6** In lieu of speaking, Council Members and members of the public may submit representations in writing for consideration by the Committee. Written representations must be received by the Planning Department or via email at planning@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk by **10am on the Monday** prior to the Planning Committee meeting and will be reported to the Committee via an Addendum Report. Representations in lieu of speaking received after this time will not be accepted.
- 6.7** An application scheduled for determination at the Planning Committee will not be withdrawn from the schedule due to failure of interested parties to register their request to speak within the above specified timeframe.
- 6.8** An application may be withdrawn from the schedule at the Chair's discretion and only in exceptional circumstances. Verification of the exceptional circumstances must be submitted via planning@causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk by **12 noon on the Tuesday** prior to the Committee meeting for discussion with the Chair.
- 7.0 Decisions Contrary to Officer Recommendation**
- 7.1** On occasion, the Planning Committee may determine an application contrary to Planning Officers' recommendation. Where the Committee makes such a decision it must be based on sound, clear and logical planning reasons, linked to the development plan, relevant planning policy and material considerations. Such reasons must be fully explained and clearly articulated prior to Members voting on the proposal.
- 7.2** Planning Officer(s) and/or Legal Adviser(s) will have the opportunity to explain the implications of the Planning Committee's proposal to determine the application contrary to the Officers' recommendation prior to Members voting on the proposal.

7.3 Consideration will need to be given by the Members of the Planning Committee as to whether the decision and the reasons provided for such decision are adequate and capable of being defended at an appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission with the potential for award of costs against Council or defended if challenged through a judicial review.

7.4 The reasons for any decision which are made contrary to the Planning Officers' recommendation must be fully, formally and expressly recorded in the minutes and a copy placed on file. Committee Members are required to give reasons for a decision when such decision is contrary to the Planning Officers' recommendation. These reasons are likely to be adduced as evidence in the event of an appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission, in a judicial review or other legal proceedings and will be reviewed by such bodies. For that reason time and care is required to provide particularisation of reasons as appropriate to that decision and the context.

8.0 Site Visits

8.1 It is recognised that Members of the Planning Committee may need to visit a site to help them make a decision on a planning application. For example, the proposal may be difficult to visualise or the application is particularly contentious.

8.2 The Planning Committee will determine whether to defer the determination of an application for a site visit. The site visit will normally be scheduled to take place prior to the next scheduled Planning Committee meeting.

8.3 An officer of Council should contact the applicant / agent to arrange access to the site where necessary. Invitations will be limited to Members of the Planning Committee; Council Officers and consultees to the decision-making process.

8.4 Site visits are not an opportunity to lobby Elected Members or be used to seek to influence the outcome of a proposal prior to the Planning Committee meeting. There shall be no public speaking on site visits. Therefore, members of the public cannot attend site visits.

8.5 Elected Members should not carry out their own unaccompanied site visits as there may be issues relating to permission for access to land. Furthermore, they will not have the information provided by the Planning Officer, and, in some circumstances, it might lead to allegations of bias.

8.6 Attendance of site visits is optional but is generally encouraged. The Planning Officer shall record the date of the visit, attendees and any other relevant information in the form of a written report which should be presented to the Planning Committee Meeting at which the application is to be determined.

9.0 Applications Returned to Planning Committee

9.1 On occasion an application may be required to be returned to Planning Committee for further consideration, for example due to the deferral of the determination by Planning

Committee Members for the submission of further information/amendments, receipt of new material information.

- 9.2** The same procedures will apply to the consideration of a returned application as set out at paragraph 6.3 above. However, the focus of the presentation by the Planning Officer and speakers at the further meeting should generally be restricted to the new information received.
- 9.3** Any request for speaking rights by anyone who has not previously registered to speak at the time the application was previously addressed at the Planning Committee will not be accepted.

10.0 Pre-Determination Hearings

- 10.1** The Planning Committee has a mandatory requirement to hold Pre-Determination Hearings for those major applications which have been referred to the Department for 'call-in' consideration but have been returned to the Council for determination. The Planning Committee will be required to hold a Hearing prior to the application being determined. In addition, Council may also hold Pre-Determination Hearings, at their own discretion, where they consider it necessary, to take on board local community views, as well as those in support or against the proposed development.
- 10.2** The intention is to make the application process for major applications more inclusive and transparent by giving applicants and those who have submitted representations the opportunity to be heard by Council before it takes a decision.
- 10.3** It will be a matter for the Chair of the Planning Committee and Head of Planning to judge when a Pre-Determination Hearing is appropriate, taking account of the relevance of the objections in planning terms, the complexity of the application and level of pre-application community consultation.
- 10.4** When holding a Pre-Determination Hearing the procedures will be the same as the normal Planning Committee meetings. The Planning Officer will produce a report detailing the processing of the application to date and the planning issues to be considered. The number of individuals to speak on either side, time available etc will be agreed prior to the Hearing. If the Planning Committee decides to hold the Hearing on the same day as it wishes to determine the application, the Planning Officer's report should contain a recommendation. A power-point presentation as part of the speaking rights will be allowed at the Hearing.

11.0 Lobbying

- 11.1** Members of the public and their advisors are reminded that Members of the Planning Committee are not permitted to advocate for or against or lobby for or against a planning application, planning policy, enforcement action or any other matter before the Planning Committee when they are part of the committee dealing with such matter. Further, Members of the Planning Committee are not permitted to influence or pressure planning officials of the Council in relation to any planning matter. This is mandated by

the Northern Ireland Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors and binds the Members of the Planning Committee.

12.0 Recess

12.1 When the Planning Committee meeting lasts longer than 2 hours a minimum 15 minute recess shall be taken at 2-3 hourly intervals.

13.0 Confidential Matters

13.1 In the event that the Planning Committee resolve to go 'In Committee' only Members of the Planning Committee, Council Officers in attendance and Legal Adviser(s) shall remain within the Council Chamber. All members of the public, press and other third parties must leave the Chamber including those Members of the Planning Committee who have declared an interest on that item and other Members of the Council who do not sit on the Planning Committee.

DfC Call for Evidence – District Councils; Remote/Hybrid Meetings

Q1. Generally speaking, how well do you consider the current remote meetings arrangements work?

- Very Well
 Well
 Neither well nor poorly
 Poorly
 Very Poorly
 Unsure

Rationale: Remote/hybrid meetings have allowed Local Government to continue to function effectively over the pandemic. Every Elected Member has been given the opportunity to participate in Council business despite their status in terms of shielding, sickness, caring responsibility, etc. Given that Council's shifted towards remote meetings at very short notice, with longer term planning and investment, remote meetings, but in particular hybrid meetings, have the potential to transform Local Government. A hybrid system ensures that all options are available for members, Council staff and the members of public to participate in democracy in a way that suits them best. This surely will increase participation across the board. It could encourage a more diverse offering of people getting involved in politics by breaking down traditional barriers such as childcare (or other caring responsibility), access to travel, work commitments, etc.

The remote/hybrid meetings are working very well and is a big saving in time, both in preparation to attend meetings and travel time to and from meetings. We are still not out of this pandemic yet and we need to ensure that all participants within Council meetings and committees are kept safe. Remote, makes meetings easier to schedule and attend with less travel required, more flexible and still achieves the same outcome. Hybrid method, also opens up each meeting to more people (public) to see and hear what goes on within Council meetings if they so wish to attend, yet still offers the structure and social advantages with having access to the Council Buildings when required. Now that Council has the expense of the technology and system set up, it would be a terrible waste of monies not to continue using it, plus in return is a major saving of travel expenses for Council. With Remote/Hybrid Meetings, Councillors and Staff are both able to better balance personal responsibilities with work objectives, indicating that flexibility is a key factor.

Q2. Generally speaking, do you think district councils in Northern Ireland should have the ability to hold at least some meetings remotely on a permanent basis?

- Yes
 No
 Unsure

Rationale:

Remote meetings are a very valuable tool moving forward within Council, and would very much like to see them continued permanently. Moving forward, Hybrid Meetings have numerous advantages, be it operational benefits for Councillors and staff alike, with ease of contact without lengthy travel times and even cuts down travel across departments/offices, there are bound to be financial benefits with less travel required, less heating and lighting needed and less office space required and costs associated, inclusive workforce and flexibility, even hopefully in the future we would see cuts in absenteeism. Would like to see Remote/Hybrid Meetings continue within Causeway Coast and Glens Council.

Q3. What do you think are some of the benefits of the remote meetings arrangements? Please select all that apply. More accessible for council members Reduction in travel time for councillors

- Meetings more easily accessed by local residents
 Greater transparency for council meetings
 Documents (e.g. minutes, agendas, supporting papers) are more accessible to local residents and others online
 Easier to chair meetings in an orderly fashion

DfC Call for Evidence – District Councils; Remote/Hybrid Meetings

- A virtual format promotes greater equality in speaking time during meetings
- I do not think there are any benefits to remote meetings
- Other (please specify)

Other Specify: Allowed greater access to staff for Councillors

Rationale:

Remote and hybrid meetings have made Local Government democracy much more open and accessible to the public, with members of the public able to view and listen to any meeting they choose regardless of their ability to travel to meetings. It also ensures there is no limit on the number of public persons wishing to attend any meeting, where physical meetings must adhere to health and safety limits on numbers attending. This could be particularly prudent for meetings which deal with issues of contention or local importance which may draw larger public interest than usual.

In relation to allowing greater access to staff, this assists in the democratic process in terms of having Council officers input to meetings. Remote access for staff allowed for more attendance by lower tier staff who sometimes have more intimate details of items/issues than Heads of Service or Directors. This allowed for greater scrutiny of reports, etc as well as providing better working relationships between Councillors and Council officers.

Hybrid method, also opens up each meeting to more people (public) to see and hear what goes on within Council meetings if they so wish to attend.

Q4. (For district councils only) Have you seen a reduction in costs since implementing remote meetings in your council?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Rationale: Eg Elected Member Travel and Mileage – reduction of £40k in 2020/21

Q5. What do you think are some of the disadvantages of the remote meetings arrangements, and do you have any suggestions for how they could be mitigated/ overcome? Please select all that apply.

- It is harder for members to talk to one another informally
- Meetings are less accessible for council members or local residents who have a poor-quality internet connection
- Meetings are less accessible for council members or local residents who are unfamiliar with video conferencing/ technology
- There is less opportunity for local residents to speak or ask questions
- Some find it more difficult to read documents online than in a physical format
- Debate is restricted by the remote format
- It is more difficult to provide effective opposition or scrutiny in a remote format
- It is more difficult to chair meetings in an orderly fashion
- Virtual meetings can be more easily dominated by individual speakers
- It might enable democratically elected members to live and perform their duties outside their local area on a permanent basis, therefore detaching them from the communities they serve
- I do not think there are any disadvantages to remote meetings

DfC Call for Evidence – District Councils; Remote/Hybrid Meetings

Other (please specify)

Rationale: In order to facilitate cross party cooperation and informal relationships/rapport between Councillors, some meetings should be mandatory physical meetings. This ensures that Councillors still have opportunity to speak in a more informal basis in person. However it is important not to over stress the impact this has had on Councillor relations, as many Councillors are able to reach out and continue personal relationships through other communications, at Council events, etc.

In regards to Chairing of meetings, it has been more difficult to integrate members in The Chamber and members at home seamlessly. This could be overcome by looking at bespoke technological solutions (both software and hardware) to improve the experience of both Elected Members and also the public attending/viewing meetings. It also seems as if smaller committee meetings were much easier to Chair than meetings of the full Council body such as full Council meetings, therefore limiting the extension of remote/hybrid meetings for meetings of the full Council body would mitigate against this.

Q6. What do you think are some of the main advantages of holding face-to-face meetings, as opposed to remote meetings?

Rationale: Perhaps encourages more inter-personal relationships between Councillors and may also improve the spirit of debate as members will have to face someone in person when making comments.

Q7. If permanent arrangements were to be made for district councils in Northern Ireland, for which meetings do you think they should have the option to hold remote meetings?

- For all meetings
 For most meetings with a few exceptions (please specify)

Rationale: It is important that some Council meetings are still held in person/face to face, particularly meetings of the full Council body as opposed to smaller committee and working group meetings. As meetings which include more members such as full Council meetings, etc are harder to manage online, it sometimes increases the length of meetings and makes meetings less effective.

Only for some meetings (please specify)

Rationale:

- I think councils should be able to decide for themselves which meetings they should have the option to hold remotely
 I do not think councils in Northern Ireland should have the option to hold remote meetings for any meetings
 Unsure

Q8. If permanent arrangements were to be made for district councils in Northern Ireland, in which circumstances do you think councils should have the option to hold remote meetings?

- In any circumstances
 Only in extenuating circumstances where a meeting cannot be held face-to face or some members would be unable to attend (e.g. severe weather events, coronavirus restrictions)
 I think councils in Northern Ireland should be able to decide for themselves which circumstances they should have the option to meet remotely

DfC Call for Evidence – District Councils; Remote/Hybrid Meetings

- I do not think councils in Northern Ireland should have the option to hold remote meetings under any circumstances
- Other (please specify)
- Unsure

Rationale: Every Council will have a range of different factors which will impact on the effectiveness of holding meetings remotely or in hybrid function. This may include distance members have to travel to attend, technology available to host remote meetings, internet connection, etc. Therefore it is important that Councils have the ability to choose which meetings should and should not be remote within their respective jurisdiction. Legislation should provide for all Council meetings to be held remotely/hybrid function at the Council's discretion. This ensures the Council can continue to review and amend remote provision as required.

Q9. Would you have any concerns if district councils in Northern Ireland were given the power to decide for themselves which meetings, and in what circumstances, they have the option to hold remote meetings?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Rationale: Ultimately the Council body is accountable to the public and should a Council decide on a format and frequency of meetings which does not stand up to public scrutiny, the public shall be able to return their opinion by way of casting their vote elsewhere than their current elected representative.

Q10. If yes, do you have any suggestions for how your concerns could be mitigated/ overcome

Rationale:

Q11. In your view, would making express provision for district councils in Northern Ireland to meet remotely particularly benefit or disadvantage any individuals with across the nine equality categories? e.g. those with disabilities or caring responsibilities?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Rationale: This would very much advantage those from equality, minority and vulnerable groups. The opportunity to breakdown traditional barriers to public representation in terms of both being able to serve as a public representative and also to have access to your representative, view them speaking and debating on issues with council meetings, etc, is paramount. This cannot be over stated, and this has been borne out in various committee and working groups meetings from members comments. It feels incumbent upon the Council to modernise and keep up with the times, to ensure elected politics is for everyone and anyone.