

PERTH AND KINROSS COUNCIL

31 March 2021

REVIEW OF DECISION MAKING AND COMMUNICATION ARRANGEMENTS

Report by Chief Operating Officer
(Report No. 21/36)

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report reviews the temporary adjustments to decision-making arrangements and elected member engagement which were put in place to maintain democratic decision-making and oversight, and to free up officer capacity to focus on the COVID-19 response.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Towards the end of 2020, the UK experienced a steep increase in coronavirus (COVID-19) infections and new variants which made the virus highly transmissible and placed unprecedented pressure on the NHS. On 5 January 2021, all areas of the Scottish mainland moved to temporary lockdown arrangements as part of national restrictions which were designed to suppress the virus and protect lives.
- 1.2 The delivery of the mass vaccination programme became a national priority, and all Scottish local authorities were expected to support the local roll out of the programme in the race to stop the spread of the virus and to protect lives. The efficient delivery of this programme continues to play a crucial role in paving the way to recovery.
- 1.3 On 27 January 2021, the Council agreed a range of temporary adjustments to decision-making and communication arrangements to maintain elected member decision-making and oversight, and to free up officer capacity to focus on the delivery of essential services, supporting the NHS led mass vaccination programme and dealing with any severe weather events (Report No. 21/12 refers). These arrangements were agreed for the period through to 30 June 2021, with a review by Council at its meeting on 31 March 2021.

2. CURRENT SITUATION

- 2.1 Over the last two months, the temporary adjustments to the Committee timetable and arrangements for meetings with the political groups have been effective by creating some additional capacity for officers to focus on delivering essential operational services, ensuring the safe phased return to schools and early learning and childcare and, organising and resourcing three Community Vaccination Centres in Perth, Blairgowrie and Pitlochry. Regular updates on the Council's response to COVID-19, covering all Service areas and support to the Community Vaccination Centres, have been provided at weekly Chief Executive's Group Update meetings with Leaders and at monthly Council meetings. This has included the requirement for the Council

to support business, welfare and parental grant processing, which is likely to continue for many months beyond March 2021.

- 2.2 The Scottish Government recently announced the timeline for a phased approach to the route out of the current lockdown, with the possibility of an acceleration to the easing of restrictions which are designed to suppress the virus to the lowest possible level while people return to a more normal life. Policy decisions and dates for easing out of lockdown will, of course, continue to be informed by data along with scientific and medical advice.
- 2.3 The Executive Officer Team have reviewed the current adjustments to the Council's decision-making and communication arrangements in the context of the national route map out of lockdown, as well as local requirements to support our on-going response, alongside recovery and renewal within available capacity.

3. PROPOSALS

- 3.1 The following proposals are made to return to more normal arrangements for decision-making and communication after a two-month period of temporary adjustments related to Covid-19.

Council Meetings

- 3.2 The decision of Council in January 2021 was to suspend all committee meetings, other than those that deal with quasi-judicial business or statutory appeals. These have continued in accordance with the timetable of meetings approved in December 2020.
- 3.3 It is **proposed** the timetable that was originally agreed in December 2020 for meetings of the Council, its Committees and their Sub-committees, resumes on Monday 19 April 2021, at the end of the Easter recess period.
- 3.4 The only proposed change is to move meetings of the Common Good Committees scheduled for Monday 26 April to Wednesday 28 April 2021, and from Monday 21 June to Wednesday 16 June 2021 because this is the preferred day. The updated timetable is shown as Appendix 1.
- 3.5 This proposal includes cancelling the Special Council meeting scheduled for 26 May 2021 which was part of the interim arrangements approved on 27 January 2021.
- 3.6 In view of the proposal to return to the normal calendar of meetings, the Urgent Business Committee is no longer required.

Member Officer Working Groups

- 3.7 Member Officer Working Groups (MOWGs) are used to engage elected members in shaping strategies, policies and governance arrangements ahead of finalising reports for consideration by the relevant Committee or

Sub-Committee. It is **proposed** that MOWGs, including those for Governance and the Perth and Kinross Offer are re-introduced with effect from May 2021. The next meeting of the Governance MOWG will take place on 17 May 2021 and the Perth & Kinross Offer MOWG will take place on 14 June 2021.

Reports

- 3.8 As outlined in the report to Council in January 2021, for the period covered by the timetable, reports will continue to be more focussed, and, on occasion, business may be addressed by way of presentation or verbal update.

Chief Executive's Group Updates for Leaders

- 3.9 Weekly Chief Executive's Group meetings on Teams with Leaders have provided updates on the Council's COVID-19 response, new legislation and guidance and any other emerging issues. Notes of key points from these meetings and Elected Member Bulletins have ensured a regular information flow to inform and update members on key issues across Perth and Kinross.
- 3.10 It is **proposed** that the last Chief Executive's Group Update to Leaders will take place on Monday 12 April, with a transition to previous arrangements for meetings with leaders in their own political groups with effect from the following week. Elected Member Bulletins and themed briefing sessions will continue.

Hybrid Meetings

- 3.11 March 2021 marks the one-year anniversary of significant numbers of staff and all elected members working from home. Storm damage work and glazing replacement work at Council Building at 2 High Street, Perth are due to be completed by June 2021 at the earliest. Furniture reinstatement, IT installation and deep cleaning will be required thereafter. With regard to the Council Chamber, the audio-visual equipment is being checked for compatibility with Microsoft Teams and Live Events to enable hybrid meetings for Council business, where required. Hybrid meetings would enable participants to engage in meetings within the Council Chamber as well as those who are based elsewhere, whether this be from home or another location.
- 3.12 Any return to working from offices and use of the Council Chamber must be in accordance with Scottish Government guidelines to ensure the health and safety of elected members, staff and members of the public. The route map out of lockdown in Scotland refers to a phased return of some office staff from the end of June. At this stage, there is no further detail on what this may mean in practice and, as such, it is too early to make definitive plans about what such a return may look like for elected members and staff. It is **proposed** that the use of hybrid meetings for Council and Committee meetings is explored through the Member Officer Working Group for Governance, with a further report to Council thereafter.

- 3.13 It is also **proposed** that the proposed calendar of meetings for the period July to December 2021 is brought forward for consideration at the Council meeting on 21 April 2021. In line with previous year's timetables, this would include a summer recess period between 5 July and 13 August 2021.
- 3.14 The pandemic required a major shift to new ways of working, almost overnight, to ensure delivery of council services. However, the pandemic has also been a catalyst to reimagine future ways of working, bringing efficiencies and which are in accordance with Perth and Kinross Offer. Therefore, it is sensible that the Council considers how and where we work in future, rather than reinstating work practices and habits that were prevalent before the pandemic.
- 3.15 A strategy for the future of work in Perth & Kinross Council is required; setting out a vision for how staff and elected members can work and how our residents will be able to access services in the future. This should encompass where people work, optimal use of digital technology, and should outline the essential skills, attributes and behaviours required for the future. This will be the subject of a separate report to Council later this year.

Other

- 3.16 With the suspension of the normal process for agreeing Service Business Management and Improvement Plans, it is **proposed** that Service Annual Performance Reports and Business Management and Improvement Plans will be brought forward to Scrutiny Committee and the relevant themed committees after the summer recess.
- 3.17 Other arrangements as outlined in the report to Council on 27 January 2021 (report no 21/12 refers) remain.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from the proposals in this report.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 This report reviews the interim governance and communication arrangements which were put in place earlier this year as a response to the latest phase in the COVID-19 emergency.
- 5.2 It is recommended that Council:-
- (i) approves the revised Committee timetable as set out in Appendix 1 for 19 April to 30 June 2021;
 - (ii) agrees the return of MOWGs from May 2021;
 - (iii) notes the last Chief Executive's Group Update to Leaders takes place on 12 April 2021, with a transition to previous arrangements thereafter;

- (iv) notes that hybrid meetings will be considered by the Governance MOWG ahead of a subsequent report to Council;
- (v) notes the proposed Committee timetable for the period July to December 2021 will be considered by Council on 21 April 2021; and
- (vi) notes that Service Annual Performance Reports and Business Management and Improvement Plans to go to Scrutiny Committee and the relevant themed committees after the summer recess.

Author

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Approved

Name	Designation	Date
Barbara Renton	Interim Chief Executive	23 March 2021

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1. IMPLICATIONS, ASSESSMENTS, CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

Strategic Implications	Yes / None
Community Plan / Single Outcome Agreement	Yes
Corporate Plan	Yes
Resource Implications	
Financial	None
Workforce	None
Asset Management (land, property, IST)	None
Assessments	
Equality Impact Assessment	
Strategic Environmental Assessment	None
Sustainability (community, economic, environmental)	None
Legal and Governance	None
Risk	None
Consultation	
Internal	Yes
External	None
Communication	
Communications Plan	None

1. Strategic Implications

Community Plan/Single Outcome Agreement

- 1.1 An effective governance framework will support the Council to deliver all of the outcomes of the Local Outcome Improvement Plan and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Corporate Plan

- 1.2 An effective governance framework will support the Council to deliver all of the outcomes of its Corporate Plan and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Resource Implications

Financial

- 2.1 None.

Workforce

- 2.2 None.

Asset Management (land, property, IT)

2.3 None.

3. Assessments

3.1 Equality Impact Assessment

(i) Assessed as **not relevant** for the purposes of EqIA

3.2 Strategic Environmental Assessment

(i) No action is required as the Act does not apply to the matters presented in this report.

Legal and Governance

3.3 The Head of Legal & Governance Services and Head of Finance were consulted in the preparation of this report.

4. Consultation

Internal

4.1 Executive Officer Team have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

External

4.2 None.

5. Communication

5.1 Not applicable.

2. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

3. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Committee Timetable 19 April 2021 to 30 June 2021