

Report of:	Charlotte Benjamin, Director of Legal and Governance Services Councillor Barrie Cooper, Executive Member for Environment, Finance and Governance.
Submitted to:	Council – 24 November 2021
Subject:	Paperless meetings

Summary

Proposed decision(s)

It is recommended that Council approves the following:

1. 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 requirement for different format). Councillors can use their Council issued devices and the functionality of Modern Gov to access papers, printing off their own copies at home as and when required.
2. That officers continue to support councillors in the understanding and operation of their devices and the Modern.Gov app.
3. That the Council shall provide in respect of each meeting to which the public would be entitled to attend referred to in paragraph (1) above:
 - (a) one hard copy agenda for viewing by the public at the main reception of the Council offices following publication of the agenda, and
 - (b) two hard copy agendas for viewing by the public at any such meeting.
4. That the following amendment be made to the Access to Information Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution:

“Reference in these procedure rules to the making available or supply of copies of any agenda and reports, or any other written material submitted to the Council, Executive, Committee or Sub-Committee shall include the provision of such copies by electronic means.”

Report for:	Key decision:	Confidential:	Is the report urgent?
Decision	No	N/A	Non urgent

Contribution to delivery of the 2021-24 Strategic Plan		
People	Place	Business
By reducing the amount of paper we use, we will ensure our town acts to tackle climate change, promoting sustainable lifestyles.	.	Transitioning to digital delivery will ensure we strive to deliver value for money and enhance the reputation of Middlesbrough
Ward(s) affected		
N/A		

What is the purpose of this report?

- Following the successful trial of paperless meetings of the Executive, Individual Executive Member and pre Executive meetings, Executive Members wish to seek the necessary commitment from full Council to achieve paperless meetings for all Council, Executive or any other Council meeting, Panel or Working Group by embracing the current technology available to councillors and officers in order to meet our environmental and digital programme commitments .

Why does this report require a Member decision?

- The changes to the way in which councillors receive committee papers affects all Members of the Council.

Report Background

- The Council currently provides, and delivers via 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 viewing by the public present or as spares. Printed agendas are also provided for certain directors, senior officers, and committee staff.
- During the Covid-19 emergency, and due to limited access to reprographics and couriers, it became necessary to restrict printed papers to Councillors and even then, only post them out as necessary.
- Officers were asked to work at home and therefore the internal post system was no longer an appropriate mechanism for distribution to staff. Officers were asked to view their reports electronically and have made the switch seamlessly. In a similar way, the press and public were asked to view documents through the Council's website. We are not aware of any adverse comments in relation to these arrangements. Officers have maintained the paperless approach with all Leadership and departmental managers meetings transitioning to using the Modern Gov app to access team meeting papers.
- In common with other councils, Middlesbrough faces a number of significant challenges over the next few years particularly in respect of:

- (a) meeting our corporate responsibilities in addressing the climate emergency and the Council's commitment to be carbon neutral, and
- (b) finding sufficient resources to continue to provide services that meet the needs of our residents.

Climate Emergency

7. Middlesbrough Council declared a climate emergency in 2019 in order to address its obligations in relation to climate change through adopting the ten principles of the One Planet Living approach to sustainable living. The Council have adopted One Planet Living and used this approach to influence decision making for over ten years and will continue to do so in order to reach carbon net zero by 2039
8. At the Council meeting on 2 September 2020, the Mayor reaffirmed the ambition of the Council to become carbon-neutral by 2029 and for the town to become carbon-neutral by 2039.
9. On 11 May 2021, the Executive approved the adoption of a Green Strategy following an extensive public consultation process. The Green Strategy is a very long term approach to tackling climate change within Middlesbrough and the first year (2021 to 2022) is being treated as a baseline year to gather all necessary baseline data required to set targets and measure success going forward.
10. 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.

Courier and Printing Costs.

11. Each time a Committee is held, paper copies are produced for those councillors who have elected to receive paper copies of Committee papers. In addition, the paper copies are delivered by the courier to the home address of each councillor. The courier operates twice a week on a Tuesday and a Friday. Details of the costs incurred by the use of the courier and the costs involved in printing paper copies are included below:-

Courier Costs (Table 1)

2017-18	£1,670.16
2018-19	£1,937.39
2019-20	£3,892.88
2020-21	£230.88

Printing Costs (Table 2)

2017-18	£14,640.30
2018-19	£9,142.55
2019-20	£4,272.77
April 2021 to Sept 21 (Low because of Covid)	£1,996.38

Pros and Cons of paper documents

12. Having a bundle of papers hit the 'mat' is a nudge that there is reading to be done. A physical document would be a reminder of meetings to come and difficult to lose.
13. Some members prefer paper copies. Discussions with Members have highlighted that some Members prefer reading from paper documents for varying reasons. While the Council can't influence Members preferences and may not be able to go fully digital, we can work with Members and departments to proactively encourage the transformation to digital processes.
14. Readers often like to highlight passages or bookmark a page (fold over the corner). The use of a pen or highlighter is a great way to add thoughts to a document and a few years ago these simple tasks were beyond the ability of simple software solutions. However, as technology progresses such things are now possible.
15. Those who have embraced the paperless (or paper-less) world, would, however, counter that electronic documents:
 - (a) Can be searched saving the reader scouring long documents for a particular passage;
 - (b) Allows the user to highlight whole sentences and leave comments in the virtual margin;
 - (c) Allows the user to create multiple versions and track the changes;
 - (d) Allows the user to share thoughts with colleagues by emails and google docs;
 - (e) Saves storage space at home;
 - (f) Allows user to back up documents so they can't be lost (as easily);
 - (g) The font size can be increased to aid reading;
 - (h) Can be read out for those who find long documents difficult (for example those with dyslexia or other requirements);
 - (i) Allows user to copy and paste passages into other documents, notes or emails;
 - (j) reduces CO2 emissions; and
 - (k) reduces officer work load and time
16. Even with paper copies there is still risk of data protection issues and the potential for papers to be mislaid or lost. In the past, an envelope containing exempt committee papers has been mislaid. It is accepted that this is not a regular occurrence, but given the sensitivity of some of this information, one failure is perhaps one too many.

17. Disposal of paper copies can also be problematic in that Councillors may recycle documents (including annotations) which could then be intercepted. It would be best practice for all council documents to be shredded and this is already required for anything with notes, containing personal data or exempt/confidential reports. In respect of deleting electronic documents, password protected documents will remain protected regardless of deletion method.
18. Currently, exempt information is available on the Modern.Gov system for Councillors to view, using their login details, as appropriate.
19. Overall, the benefits of going paperless outweigh the drawbacks, and the Council will no longer be able to ignore the trend. In order to successfully transform from paper-based to digital, Democratic Services will offer additional support to those members that require it.

Hybrid Meetings

20. During the Covid pandemic, officers have also been required to facilitate hybrid committee meetings. There may be a requirement for hybrid meetings to remain in the future, to complement the Council's and other organisations' blended approach to working – allowing officers, witnesses and presenters to join the meeting remotely.
21. Viewing the papers and attending the meeting may cause some concerns of accessing two items from one screen, however digital solutions also allow documents to be shared on screen in real time ensuring that papers are viewable by all those attending.
22. The table below, gives an indication of the committees that are likely to utilise the facility of hybrid meetings and how often the facility might be utilised. Democratic Services are currently exploring a solution.

Definitions:- Note information relating to meeting uplifts and hybrid likelihood should be seen as indicative only. Meeting up-lift - this is essentially an estimate about how many meetings <i>may</i> take place in addition to those scheduled. Hybrid meeting - those meetings where either a proportion of Members, or external stakeholders, participate in a meeting via remote means. To be hybrid it is assumed that those virtual participants can be seen and heard clearly by those in the physical meeting and can interact with proceedings as though they were there. Hybrid Likelihood - how likely those meetings would fully utilise hybrid facilities. High = Often; Medium = Occasionally; Low = rarely. This is highly subjective and likely to be subject to change	As found on Modern Gov	Meeting uplift based Dem Services input	Hybrid Likelihood based on Dem Services input
Committee	Meetings per year 2021/22	Meetings per year (assumed uplift)	Hybrid likelihood
Ad Hoc Scrutiny Panel		1	High

Adult Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel	9	9	High
Children and Young People's Learning Scrutiny Panel	10	10	High
Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel	9	9	High
Constitution and Members' Development Committee	3	3	Medium
Corporate Affairs and Audit Committee	6	6	Medium
Corporate Health and Safety Steering Group	1	4	Medium
Corporate Parenting Board	6	6	High
Council	12	12	Low
Culture and Communities Scrutiny Panel	9	9	High
Deputy Mayor and Executive Member- Culture and Communities	1	3	Medium
Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel	10	10	High
Executive Member - Environment, Finance & Governance	2	3	Medium
Executive Member - Regeneration	3	3	Medium
Executive	10	10	High
Health Scrutiny Panel	10	10	High
Joint Archives Committee	2	2	Medium
Licensing Committee	15	15	Medium
Licensing Sub Committee A	6	6	Medium
Live Well South Tees Board	3	3	Medium
Overview and Scrutiny Board	10	10	High
Planning and Development Committee	10	10	Low
Staff Appeals Committee	1	3	Low
Standards Committee	5	5	Low
Tees Valley Joint Health Scrutiny Committee	4	4	High
Teesside Pension Board	4	4	Medium
Teesside Pension Fund Committee	4	4	High
The Mayor - Executive Member for Children's Safeguarding and Adult Social Care and Public Protection	4	4	Medium
Works Council	2	3	Medium

Total	171	181
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Paperless Meetings background and proposal

23. In 2013, a Scrutiny investigation was held in relation to the proposal to move towards the use of mobile devices for members. The proposal to move to paperless meetings was dependent upon councillors (and officers) having improved ICT devices with all the necessary functionality and software to enable them to read and annotate agendas electronically and, importantly, having the necessary training on how the devices and software operate. At that time, the Council's IT infrastructure was not as developed as it is today and it did not lend itself easily to mobile connectivity.
24. As part of the Council's recent investment in its ICT infrastructure, the Council procured new Dell laptop devices for all councillors, which were rolled out to them to ensure that all councillors have access to equipment to enable more streamlined digital services.
25. On 21 December 2020, the Council rolled out a new Committee Management System. Modern.Gov is the market leading provider of robust meetings management systems and it is used by 76% of councils in England and Wales. The Modern.Gov app ensures that councillors always have the latest meeting papers for the committees that they are interested in and allows them to highlight sections of reports and make annotations in exactly the same way as they would with a paper copy. Document navigation is made quick and simple via bookmarking and intuitive controls. It also enables the user to view information offline.
26. Councillors have been given support both by ICT and Democratic Services staff, including the Political Assistants in helping them to understand, and to become more confident in using their device and the Modern.Gov app that supports the principle of paperless meetings. In addition, individual and group training courses for councillors on the operation of the Modern.Gov app were and still are facilitated by the Political Assistants and Democratic Services Officers. This support will continue, until all councillors are confident in using the Modern Gov app.
27. The Modern.Gov app, which can also be downloaded by the public via our website, has a feature which allows councillors (but not the public) to view confidential papers which are exempt from publication.
28. A number of local authorities nationally have already adopted a paperless approach to committee meetings by the use of laptops/tablets by councillors, together with the associated app enabling them to view and annotate agendas. These authorities recognise the benefits, which can generally be summarised as follows:
- Devices are portable, convenient and easy to use once users become familiar with them.
 - Access to information can be improved – e.g. all meeting papers (current and previous) are easily available.
 - Information can be stored very securely, which is important when meeting papers contain sensitive, or exempt/confidential information.
 - Savings can be made on paper, printing and postage of meeting papers.

- An authority's carbon footprint can be reduced - paper and stationery usage is reduced, less energy is used to produce printed papers.
29. As a Council, we are increasingly encouraging residents to access our services electronically as much as possible. Members of the public are able to access meeting agendas, reports and minutes either directly via our website, or by downloading the Modern.Gov app on their phone or tablet.
30. The Council has already put in place measures to introduce paperless meetings at officer level; for example, the weekly meetings of the Corporate Management Team and Leadership Management Team are now fully paperless.

What decision(s) are being asked for?

31. It is recommended as follows:

- I. That Council adopt a “paperless” approach to Council and Committee 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 requirement for different format). Councillors can use their Council issued devices and the functionality of Modern Gov to access papers, printing off their own copies at home as and when required.
 - II. That officers continue to support councillors in the understanding and operation of their devices and the Modern.Gov app and provide appropriate member development opportunities to improve chairing skills and reading skills using digital resources and virtual/hybrid meetings.
 - III. That the Council shall provide in respect of each meeting to which the public would be entitled to attend referred to in paragraph (1) above:
 - (a) one hard copy agenda for viewing by the public at the main reception of the Council offices following publication of the agenda, and
 - (b) two hard copy agendas for viewing by the public at any such meeting.
 - IV. That the following amendment be made to the Access to Information Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution:
- “Reference in these procedure rules to the making available or supply of copies of any agenda and reports, or any other written material submitted to the Council, Executive, Committee or Sub-Committee shall include the provision of such copies by electronic means.”

Why is this being recommended?

32. To deliver on the Council’s commitments to secure ongoing savings in its revenue budget and to assist in achieving the Council’s corporate aspirations to reduce its carbon footprint, whilst still complying with legislation requiring the provision of copy agendas for inspection by the public.

Options considered

Option 1

33. To adopt a paperless approach to all meetings involving both councillors and officers. As part of this, officers will continue to support councillors in the understanding and operation of their devices and the Modern.Gov app. We will continue to comply with statutory requirements to make available a reasonable number of copies of an agenda at any meeting to which the public are entitled to attend.

Option 2

34. To make no change to our current arrangements.

At the Council meeting on 2 September 2020, the Mayor reaffirmed the ambition of the Council to become carbon-neutral by 2029 and for the town to become carbon-neutral by 2039. Failure to evolve would not contribute to this ambition.

35. For the reasons outlined in this report, Option 1 is recommended.

Conclusion

36. In conclusion, a number of councils have completed a transition to paperless meetings over the past three or four years and there is a clear direction of travel in this regard, such that over the course of the next few years it is expected to become standard practice in local government.

37. This Council is now at the point at which it can begin a transformation to radically reduce our reliance on, and use of, paper. This will not only save the Council a considerable amount of money each year, but also assist in reducing our carbon footprint and set an example to others.

Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)

Legal

38. 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.

39. In relation to full Council meetings, Schedule 12 to the 1972 Act requires us, amongst other things, to send to every member of the Council "a summons to attend the meeting, specifying the business proposed to be transacted at the meeting" at least five clear days before the meeting. This provision also applies to committee meetings by virtue of Section 99 of the 1972 Act.

40. In respect of Council and committee agendas, including the "connected" reports, Section 100B (1) of the 1972 Act requires that "copies of the agenda for a meeting" and "copies of any report for the meeting shall be open to inspection by members of the public at the offices of the council."

Section 100B (6) of the 1972 Act requires us to make available for the use of members of the public present at the meeting “a reasonable number of copies” of the agenda and reports for the meeting.

- 41.In partial response to changing technologies, The Local Government (Electronic Communications) (England) Order 2015 permits delivery of an electronic summons to Councillors, subject to the consent of the Councillor.
- 42.Regulation 7 of the Local Government (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012 requires us to make available for public inspection at least five clear days before a meeting of the Executive a copy of the agenda (including the reports) at the Council offices and on the website. Paragraph (6) of Regulation 7 requires us to make available for the use of members of the public present at the meeting “a reasonable number of copies” of the agenda and reports for the meeting.

Financial

43. The financial costs incurred by the Council for the printing costs and courier service associated with agenda/papers distribution are included at paragraph 29 of the report.
- 44.Annual savings in printing costs and courier delivery costs could be achieved if the Council adopted paperless meetings.
- 45.If the proposals in this report were introduced, there would still be a requirement to produce two hard copy agendas in respect of each meeting to which the public are entitled to attend. However, the cost would be a fraction of the current costs.

Policy Framework

- 46.The decision will not amend the Council’s policy framework. The decision is aligned with the Mayor’s priorities and the Strategic plan 2021 – 2024.

Equality and Diversity

- 47.It is envisaged that the main impact will be on elected members, some of whom may have medical reasons/visual impairments for requiring documents in a certain format, these requirements will be catered for wherever possible. An impact assessment has also been undertaken (see appendix 1). Two paper copies of the agenda papers will still be available to members of the public at each meeting. The Council website meets the WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standard. This is the industry standard and if achieved means the website is accessible to all.

Risk

- 48.The key risks to the Council of not embracing the concept of paperless meetings are:
 - (a) The opportunity of achieving financial efficiency savings would be missed.

- (b) The opportunity of demonstrating a willingness to reduce our carbon footprint, and effecting an actual reduction in CO2 emissions, would be missed.
- (c) Reputational damage to the Council as a consequence of (a) and (b) above.
- (d) Some Members may feel disenfranchised if unable to access physical reports and support isn't in place to access electronic data.

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

49. Further ongoing training be delivered to those members that require it in relation to the use of Modern Gov.

50. That the following amendment be made to the Access to Information Procedure Rules in Part 4 of the Constitution:

51.“Reference in these procedure rules to the making available or supply of copies of any agenda and reports, or any other written material submitted to the Council, Executive, Committee or Sub-Committee shall include the provision of such copies by electronic means.”

Background papers

52. There were no background papers used in the preparation of this report.

Contact: Sylvia Reynolds, Head of Democratic Services

Email: sylvia_reynolds@middlesbrough.gov.uk