

FULL EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT FORM B
<p>Function being assessed:</p> <p>Introduction of Virtual Committee Meetings</p>
<p>Is this a new function or a review of an existing function?</p> <p>This is a review of an existing function and is being undertaken under Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 No.392 ('the Regulations').</p>
<p>What are the aims/purpose of the function?</p> <p>The purpose of the regulations are to permit Local Authorities to continue to conduct business and take decisions during the "lockdown" and whilst "social distancing" continues to be necessary.</p>
<p>Is the function designed to meet specific needs such as the needs of minority ethnic groups, older people, disabled people etc?</p> <p>Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 ("the 2020 Act") provides that Regulations can be made relating to requirements for local authorities in relation to holding meetings, the requirements on timing and frequency of meetings, the place at which meetings must be held, and the way in which people may attend, speak and vote at meetings.</p> <p>The Regulations also make provisions relating to public admission and access to meetings and the availability of meeting documents. These Regulations modify or dis-apply various statutory provisions relating to local authority meetings and public and press access to such meetings.</p> <p>The Regulations make provision for the conduct of local authority meetings held before 7 May 2021.</p> <p>As such, they cover all the protected characteristics, namely age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race, religion or beliefs, sex and sexual orientation.</p>
<p>What information has been gathered on this function? (Indicate the type of information gathered e.g. statistics, consultation, other monitoring information)? Attach a summary or refer to where the evidence can be found.</p> <p>The parent Legislation was supported by a summary of impacts. The development of the proposals in relation to the conduct of virtual meetings have been supported by government and other guidance offered by various professional bodies such as the Local Government Association, the Lawyers' in Local Government Group (LLG), the Centre for Public Scrutiny and the Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO).</p>

Does your analysis of the information show different outcomes for different groups (higher or lower uptake/failure to access/receive a poorer or inferior service)? If yes, indicate which groups and which aspects of the policy or function contribute to inequality?

Certain procedural provisions connected with public participation at Committee meetings have the potential to present some individuals with specific protected characteristics with some challenges. These are identified below:

1. The need to possess and to use a computer, tablet and smartphone technology may be a barrier potentially for some protected characteristic groups e.g. the elderly/disabled engaging in the process, whether directly as participants in the meeting or indirectly as observers.
2. Virtual meetings, in common with meetings held in the Council Chamber, could potentially raise some challenges for some protected characteristic groups e.g. for whom English is not a first language.

Whilst some challenges may be presented and the Council will look at how best to address them if they arise, there are also potential advantages in that virtual meetings may broaden accessibility for a larger group of people who wish to participate in this process, i.e. those who may otherwise be unable to attend meetings in the Guildhall in person. The technology also provides participants with an option to turn on subtitles.

Are these differences justified (e.g. are there legislative or other constraints)? If they are, explain in what way.

1. In accordance with the regulations made pursuant to the Coronavirus Act 2020, the introduction of virtual meetings are a response to the current unprecedented national situation. These Regulations are in force until at least 7 May 2021. Whilst it is recognised that the arrangements may present some challenges to certain groups with specific characteristics, there is a counterbalancing responsibility to take into account the urgent public health needs of residents, staff and councillors.
It is important to note that the ability to participate in virtual meetings is only one of multiple means for the public to ask questions of, and hold to account, elected Members. Beyond virtual meetings residents have the ability to contact councillors or officers at any time through any medium including in writing, by telephone and via social media. At a virtual meeting there may be opportunities to put questions in writing before the meeting.
2. The requirement under the relevant legislation for members of the public to be in attendance to make representations at any Licencing Sub Committee will be facilitated and, whilst not a legislative requirement, the ability for a limited number of registered objectors and the applicant to participate in meetings of the Development Control Committee or Neighbourhood Planning Sub Committees will also be facilitated.

What action needs to be taken as a result of this Equality Impact Assessment to address any detrimental impacts or meet previously unidentified need? Include here any reasonable adjustments for access by disabled people. Include dates by which action will be taken. Attach an action plan if necessary.

These arrangements have been made under Regulations which are in response to an unprecedented situation. The Regulations are in place until 7 May 2021 but the arrangements for their implementation will be kept under constant review and reasonable adjustments made if practicable. However, virtual meetings may broaden accessibility for a larger group of people who wish to participate in this process, i.e. those who may otherwise be unable to attend meetings in the Guildhall in person. The technology also provides participants with an option to turn on subtitles.

Additional Democratic Services staff will be on duty to support participants in virtual meetings and guidance notes are being prepared for the public to assist them to access the meeting. The technology allows telephone access to meetings and written representations will be allowed for those who have no access to the internet. Representatives will be allowed to speak on behalf of those who find accessing an online meeting or speaking in public difficult.

When will you evaluate the impact of action taken? Give review dates.

The Regulations permit the conduct of virtual meetings until 7 May 2021. It is anticipated that the provisions will be in place until at least October 2020 at which time they will be reviewed by Full Council. During that time the arrangements will be monitored and kept under continual review as best practice emerges both locally and nationally.

Assessment completed by:

NAME: Gary Marson/Lauren McCann

SERVICE: Corporate and Communities

DATE:

Please send your completed assessment to your service head. A copy should then be sent to the Equality Adviser.