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| <b>Report on</b>         | Regulations on Remote Meetings - Transaction of Council & Committee Meeting |
| <b>Date of Meeting</b>   | Thursday 27 <sup>th</sup> June 2024   |
| <b>Reporting Officer</b> | J Mc Guckin, Head of Strategic Services and Engagement                      |
| <b>Contact Officer</b>   | J McGuckin, Head of Strategic Services and Engagement                       |

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| <b>Is this report restricted for confidential business?</b>         | Yes |   |
| If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon | No  | X |

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| <b>1.0</b> | <b>Purpose of Report</b>   |
| 1.1        | To update members on activity being undertaken by the Department for Communities (DfC) on preparing and bringing forward regulations to enable Councils to opt to continue with fully remote and/or hybrid meetings.   |
| 1.2        | To give consideration to the Council position on transacting future council and committee business by remote means, subject to the passing of regulations through the NI Assembly in the form of the <i>Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024</i> .   |
| <b>2.0</b> | <b>Background</b>  |
| 2.1        | From the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic Council had been transacting its council and committee meeting business by virtual means by convening hybrid meetings initially over Webex before migrating to using Zoom. Hybrid meetings whereby some members attended in person and others virtually, initially to comply with social distancing requirements, were undertaken under section 78 (local authority meetings) of the coronavirus Act 2020 and subordinate legislation passed by the NI Assembly which came into operation on 1st May 2020. |
| 2.2        | Extension Orders to this provision were made on a number of occasions but came to an end on 6th March 2024. With the ability for Councils to transact its business by remote/virtual means having ceased such meetings stopped in March 2024. All meetings are now in-person only.   |
| 2.3        | DfC) has now drafted regulations for consideration by the Minister for Communities and subsequent consideration by the NI Assembly. It is the understanding of Council that the draft regulations have been through the DfC Solicitor and is the intention of the Department to bring them forward to the NI Assembly as soon as practicable . The regulations are currently titled <i>the Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024</i> .  |

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| 2.4        | The most recent communication from the Department on this matter has been the 3 <sup>rd</sup> May confirming a second draft of the regulations and that the matter is still receiving the consideration of the Department.  |
| <b>3.0</b> | <b>Main Report</b>  |
| 3.1        | The Department sought commentary from all Councils on the draft Regulations as initially issued in mid-March.   |
| 3.2        | Council submitted commentary by way of two specific points at that time as to their wording and the standing orders required to be incorporated into our Standing Orders to transact business.  |
| 3.3        | DfC issued further correspondence, dated 3 <sup>rd</sup> May as attached, together with a further final draft of the Regulations. Refer to appendix A.  |
| 3.4        | Although the recent correspondence gives an indication that it wishes to make the regulations as soon as possible to keep the gap in legislative provision to a minimum it has not yet confirmed a definitive timeline for bringing forward regulations to the NI Assembly.   |
| 3.5        | <p>Of the understanding that DfC is working towards having them considered before the NI Assembly summer recess it would be October 2024, at earliest, before we could reconvene hybrid meetings by virtual means. New Regulations, should they pass the Assembly, will require a change in our Standing Orders which requires a minimum of 2 months or two council meetings to do i.e. any change to our standing orders is required to be scheduled onto a council meeting agenda and debate on same stands adjourned until the next available meeting. Should they not be brought before the NI Assembly within this timeframe then it will be later in our business year before hybrid meetings could be reconvened. The NI Assembly goes into summer recess on 5<sup>th</sup> July.</p> <p><b>Initial Preparations &amp; Decision Required</b></p> |
| 3.6        | In the interests of being prepared should the regulations pass the NI Assembly, particularly before its summer recess, consideration is being given to the required changes to our Standing Orders to facilitate a migration back to transacting our business by remote means. Committee services are liaising with the Legal team who are considering the necessary changes with a view to having them ready to be brought as soon as practicable to a Council meeting after the remote meeting regulations are passed the NI Assembly.  |
| 3.7        | The remote meeting regulations will provide the Council with the ability to hold remote meetings but not compel it. To allow officers to continue with preparations Council should give official consideration on whether it wishes to opt to hold future council and committee meetings by remote/hybrid meetings, going forward. A council decision on this will allow us to ensure we are able to meet the will of the Council and make the necessary preparations.  |

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| <b>4.0</b> | <b>Other Considerations</b>   |
| <b>4.1</b> | <b>Financial, Human Resources &amp; Risk Implications</b>   |
|            | Financial: N/A  |
|            | Human: N/A  |
|            | Risk Management: By making a determination on whether it wishes to opt to transact by remote means will expedite the implementation of the Regulations once considered by the NI Assembly, to facilitate future remote/hybrid meetings.   |
| <b>4.2</b> | <b><u>Screening &amp; Impact Statements</u></b>   |
|            | Equality & Good Relations Implications: Regulations are the responsibility of DfC and any associated considerations required. Officers will give consideration to any potential implications as they come up and mitigate any negative impacts identified before their implementation as part of any screening, where possible. |
|            | Rural Needs Implications: Regulations are the responsibility of DfC and any associated considerations required. Officers will give consideration to any potential implications as they come up and mitigate any negative impacts identified before their implementation as part of any screening, where possible.               |
| <b>5.0</b> | <b>Recommendation(s)</b>  |
| 5.1        | That members give consideration as to whether it wishes Council to opt to transact its council and committee meetings by fully remote and/or hybrid means, subject to regulations being passed by the NI Assembly.  |
| <b>6.0</b> | <b>Documents Attached &amp; References</b>  |
|            | Appendix A: Final Draft of the Remote Hybrid Regulations  |