

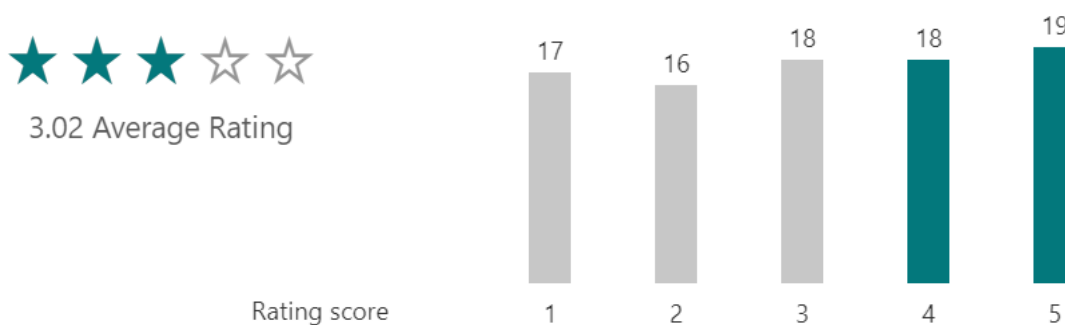
Democratic decision making – Appendix 1 results from survey

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Following the announcement that the regulations permitting virtual meetings would not be extended after the 6 May 2021, Dorset Council carried out a survey to gauge opinions on a number of options to maintain the decision-making processes of the council and to keep attendees safe from May to the end of June.
- 1.2 This survey was sent to all councillors and those supporting committee meetings (including Democratic Services, Senior Leadership Team and Corporate Leadership Team). 92 results were received (27 officers and 65 councillors). The results from the survey are included below.

2. Survey results

Question 1: Would you be comfortable to attend a committee meeting in person between May and June of this year if this option was available with social distancing in place? (1 = not comfortable at all, 5 = very comfortable)



The results from this survey clearly show a split opinion as to how comfortable people would feel attending a committee meeting in person.

Question 2: Please provide any comments or reasons for your response to Question 1.

For the people who stated to Question 1 that they were uncomfortable to attend (1 or 2 out of 5), their main concerns related to their personal health or those of a family member/ support bubble. Those who responded to question 1 with a neutral response (3 out of 5) generally stated that they would attend if required but would expect a large amount of safety precautions etc in place.

37 people stated that they were comfortable to attend committee meetings in person during this time (4 or 5 out of 5). Generally, this group showed confidence with the vaccine roll-out and social distancing measures which would be put in place.

Question 3: Over the last year what advantages (if any) have you experienced of attending committee meetings virtually?

There were very clear trends to these responses including the saving of time and the reduction in travel and its associated cost and time commitment. Several responders also mentioned the benefit this had accrued towards the council's climate change strategy and helping to assist them with work or caring responsibilities.

Several people commented that they observed committee meetings that they were not members of and would not normally attend in person.

Councillors noted that they had been more productive as they have been able to increase their commitments during the day by the reduction in travelling. There were also several comments about how easy the meetings were to arrange.

Question 4: Over the last year what disadvantages (if any) have you experienced of attending committee meetings virtually?

A small group of responders replied with "none" to this question so have tended to see the virtual meetings as a positive development. However, there were several trends to the responses as to the disadvantages of virtual committee meetings. These included:

- technical difficulties such as a problem with IT or Wi-Fi connections.
- a large number of responders also noted that it was difficult to read body language in a virtual setting and this hampered the discussion/debate at the committee.
- several comments stated that the public may feel less connected to the committee proceedings in a virtual setting.
- many people also noted the lack of opportunity for networking/ social interaction with colleagues and peers before and after the meetings.
- in question 3 some people had commented that they had been able to add additional meetings to their day due to the time saved in travelling but for question 4 people felt that this had increased their screen fatigue and strain on their eyes.

Question 5: What do you think the advantages and disadvantages have been to the public and local democracy in Dorset by hosting virtual meetings over the last year? Please give your opinions and comments below.

This survey was sent to internal stakeholders within the council so this is their perceived views of how this may have benefitted the public and local democracy.

Further evidence from external stakeholders would be useful to gather to explore this in more detail.

Generally, the responders agreed that access to observe the committee meetings had been greatly improved using virtual meetings. In a similar response to question 3 it was noted that there were savings in time and travel. A main advantage was stated that the public could watch the proceedings live or watch the recording later at a time of their choosing.

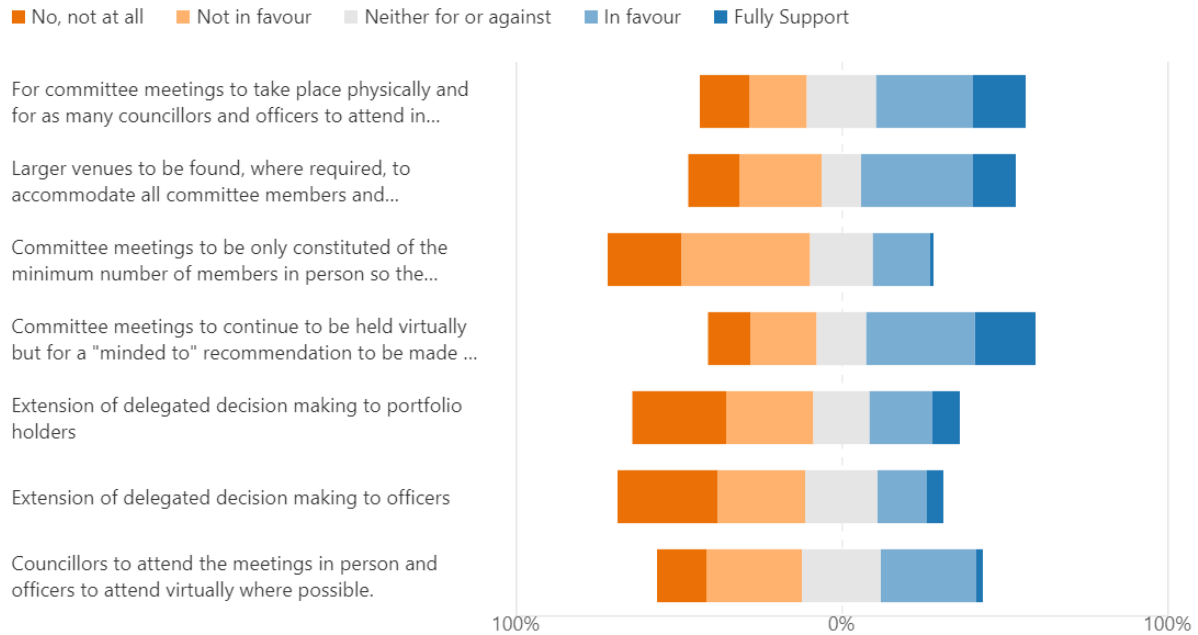
However, throughout the responses there are many comments relating to lack of interaction available to the public with the virtual committee meetings and the public being unable to engage with the committee members as part of the debate.

There was also concern expressed about people without internet access and how they were unable to observe or participate with democracy at Dorset Council in a virtual setting.

Question 6: The council is exploring a range of options to provide decision making at the council during this time. Please could you rate each suggestion as to whether you would be in favour or against.

For this question, responders were asked to rate the following statements as to how in favour they were of each. The options were:

1. For committee meetings to take place physically and for as many councillors and officers to attend in person as social distancing measures allow
2. Larger venues to be found, where required, to accommodate all committee members and supporting officers
3. Committee meetings to be only constituted of the minimum number of members in person so the committee is quorate.
4. Committee meetings to continue to be held virtually but for a "minded to" recommendation to be made by the committee which would be officially sanctioned by the Head of Paid Service (Matt Prosser) under delegated powers.
5. Extension of delegated decision making to portfolio holders
6. Extension of delegated decision making to officers
7. Councillors to attend the meetings in person and officers to attend virtually where possible.



Options to only meet with as many members to make the meeting quorate and extending delegated decision making to officers and portfolio-holders (suggestions 3, 5 and 6) were the least favoured.

Whereas holding committee meetings to capacity, finding larger venues and making "minded to" recommendations (options 1, 2 and 4) were the most favourable.

However, the results clearly show a divide in opinion for each option.

The Association of Democratic Services Officers has also compiled some results for councils in the South West. From the 12 councils that responded the main trends also noted that alternatives, such as use of delegation or working on a quorum were the least favoured options.

Question 7: Please enter any other comments or suggestions that you would like to make in the space below?

There were many comments left for question 7. The main trends in these comments were questions about introducing hybrid meetings where people could attend committee meetings in person or virtually depending on their preference. At the time of these results, regulations do not currently allow for this but there were many comments made that suggested this would be advantageous to consider.

The other main concerns that were raised in this question were the elements of the risk assessment that would have to be considered for physical committee meetings to take place.