

**REPORT OF** Human Resources and Communications Manager  
**To:** O & S (Internal)  
**Subject:** Potential savings of homeworking  
**Date:** 16 March 2021 **Reference:**

**PURPOSE OF REPORT:**

To provide members with the requested information on the impact of COVID-19 in relation to working from home and Zoom meetings and potential savings.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The Council has been working continuously to implement arrangements to deal with the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These arrangements have included more flexible working for staff to ensure service delivery is maintained. Home working has been a key feature of the changes with the majority of staff (except Waste and recycling) working at least some of their time from home wherever possible.

In addition, to respond to the restrictions the pandemic has placed on us, the Council is currently holding all Committee Meetings, Sub-committees and meetings of other bodies of the Council virtually.

**2. REPORT**

At the last meeting on 15 December Councillors received a verbal update on home working and virtual meetings. From that meeting further information was requested, namely

- Carbon cost of holding zoom meetings
- Reduced travel savings for officers and impact on the carbon footprint
- Questionnaire be sent to councillors regarding virtual meetings
- Clarification regarding numbers of zoom meetings
- Staff survey results in relation to homeworking

**Carbon cost of holding zoom meetings**

Any significant software systems rely on data hubs with significant data usage, power requirements (Including data centre cooling) and could also take into account raw material usage in manufacture as well as staffing impacts on servicing the centre. Whilst these impacts are significant we must look at the impact per user and on this scale the impact of a zoom call is minimal compared to physically travelling to a meeting. The carbon audit process we are looking to embark on will be to the Governments recommended environmental reporting. This is a standard methodology utilised by public bodies for assessing and reporting carbon impacts. Our new ways of working will be captured in this process and we will be able to provide members with more details on our carbon usage across the authority.



## **Reduced travel savings for officers and members and impact of reduced travel on the carbon footprint**

We can provide a crude indication of the extent of the impacts purely in terms of looking at our travel costs – this is a comparison of our spend from April to December in 2019 and 2020 and broken down into staff and member costs.

	April 19 – Dec 19	April 20 – Dec 20	Total Saving	Total Savings (%)
Councillors	£12,579.23	£1,760.40	£10,818.83	86%
Staff	£53,091.67	£23,490.35	£29,601.32	56%
Total	£65,670.90	£25,250.75	£40,420.15	62%

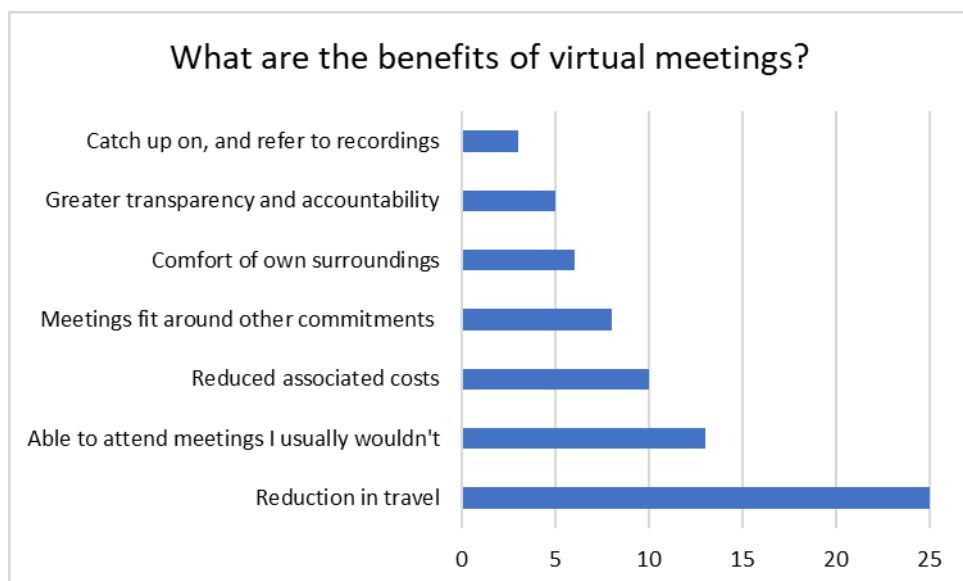
Calculating the carbon impact is more involved dependent upon a number of factors from vehicle engine size to the age and efficiency of the engine and even the type of journey. A carbon plan is shortly going to be presented to members for approval, and a significant aspect of this plan is carrying out a carbon audit of TDC operations.

### **Results from members questionnaire**

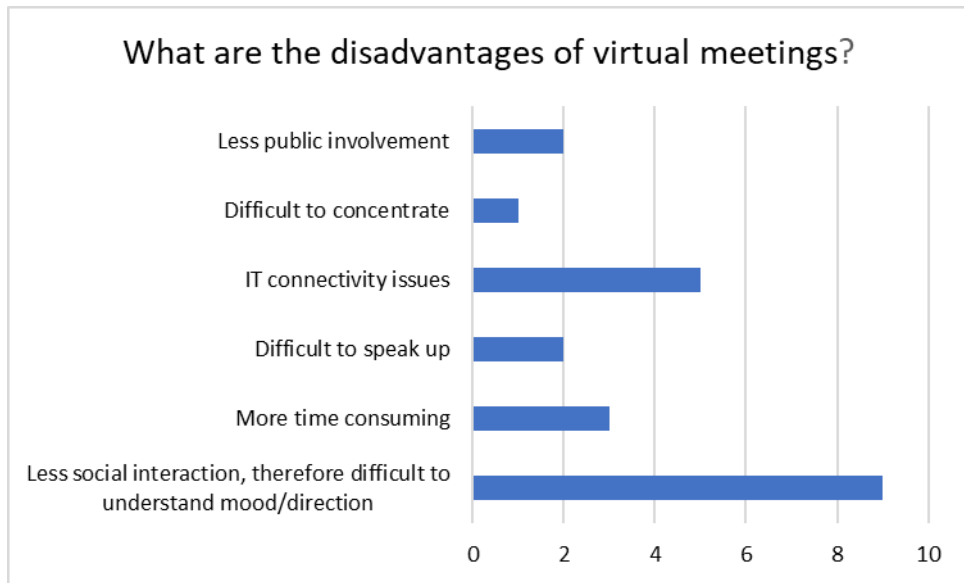
Members were asked a number of questions regarding virtual meetings. There was a total of 26 responses received which is a 76% response rate

Findings are as follows:

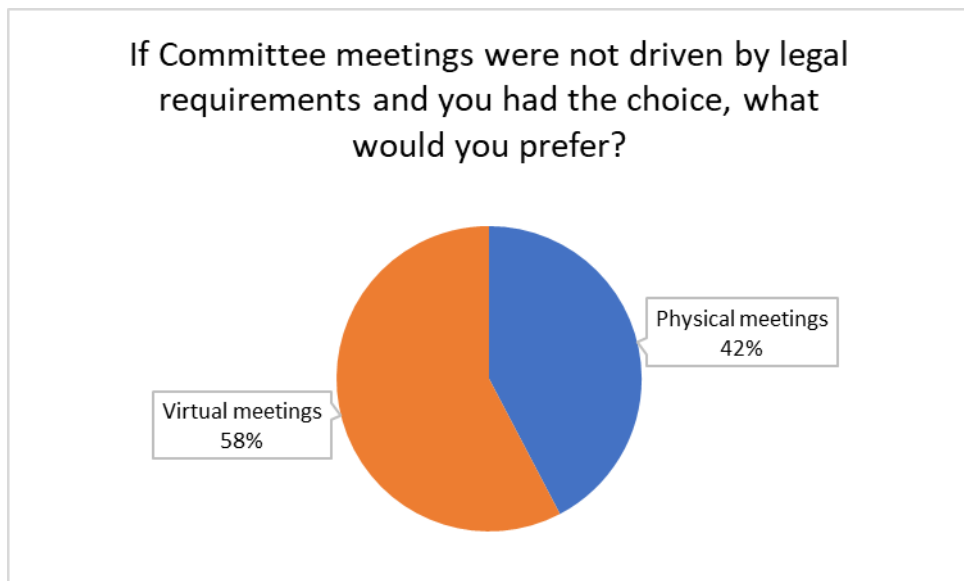
#### **Q. What do you feel are the benefits of virtual meetings?**



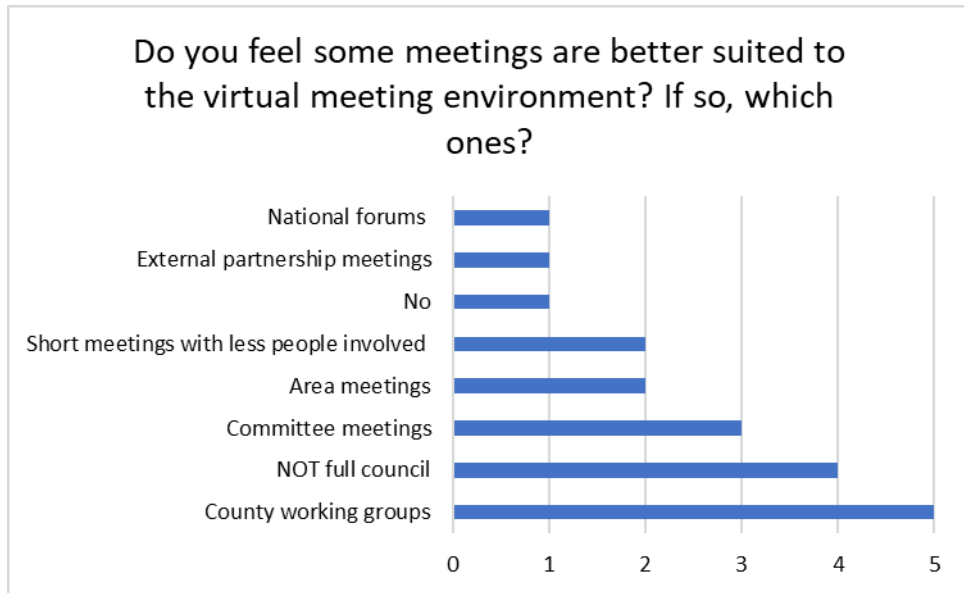
**Q. What do you feel are the disadvantages of virtual meetings?**



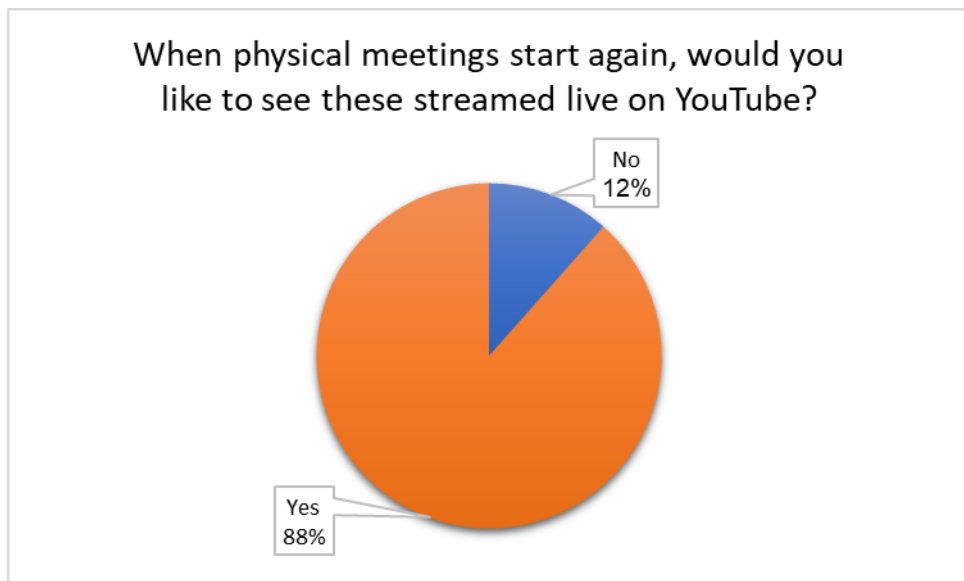
**Q. If Committee meetings were not driven by legal requirements and you had the choice, what would you prefer?**



**Q. Do you feel some meetings are better suited to the virtual meeting environment? If so, which ones?**



**Q. When physical meetings start again, would you like them to be streamed live on YouTube?**



**Q. Do you have any other relevant comments?**

<p>Attendance at Council meetings appears to be higher with less apologies for absence, but this may only be a perception. Access for the public to witness decision making far simpler and much more comfortable(public benches in Chamber very challenging to sit on).</p>
<p>It has been a steep learning curve for me but I think we have all done remarkably well. It has really been the only way to keep things going and I appreciate all the support (IT and otherwise) which has been available. I am sure in the future there is a place for both types of meeting but feel the virtual format is more suited to meetings involving less people. I am not sure of the figures but it would be interesting to know if there has been less public participation virtually.</p>
<p>I think that we must modernise as much as we can, although I appreciate we are constrained by legislation. If we feel that online meetings should continue then we should lobby the government for this. Going forwards committee meeting must be at least hybrid if not totally virtual and full council must be hybrid.</p> <p>By having online meetings not only are we more visible to the public, many of whom cannot get to Bideford to watch meetings, but it also could lead to us becoming a more diverse council. If we have online meetings - meaning less time is spent on the travelling for council duties - people who are employed (particularly younger people) may be more inclined to stand for election. My view is that the way councils have previously done business is a barrier to more representative local government. I appreciate that some members will be desperate to keep things the way they were; however, times are changing and we must move with them lest we are left behind.</p>
<p>Contact with officers and other members has been very difficult and sometimes you do feel isolated at home alone</p>
<p>I hope in the future we will continue to have some meetings virtually as it is so much easier and saves time and money and is better for the environment. However I do see the benefits of having some meetings in person (such as full council) and it also helps to build relationships between councillors which can't be replicated online. I would also like to see meetings continue to be recorded and uploaded online as I think it's really good for openness and transparency and it allows any member of the public to view what is happening and how councillors vote on certain topics which they might not otherwise have known!</p>
<p>There is a place for a limited number of virtual meetings but they are much inferior in my opinion to physical ones</p>
<p>We know that the technology is there &amp; in place to enable remote meetings to be held so I think their use should be encouraged where it is practical &amp; preferable for them as an alternative to physical traditional meetings going forward</p>
<p>A mix of face to face and visual would work well</p>



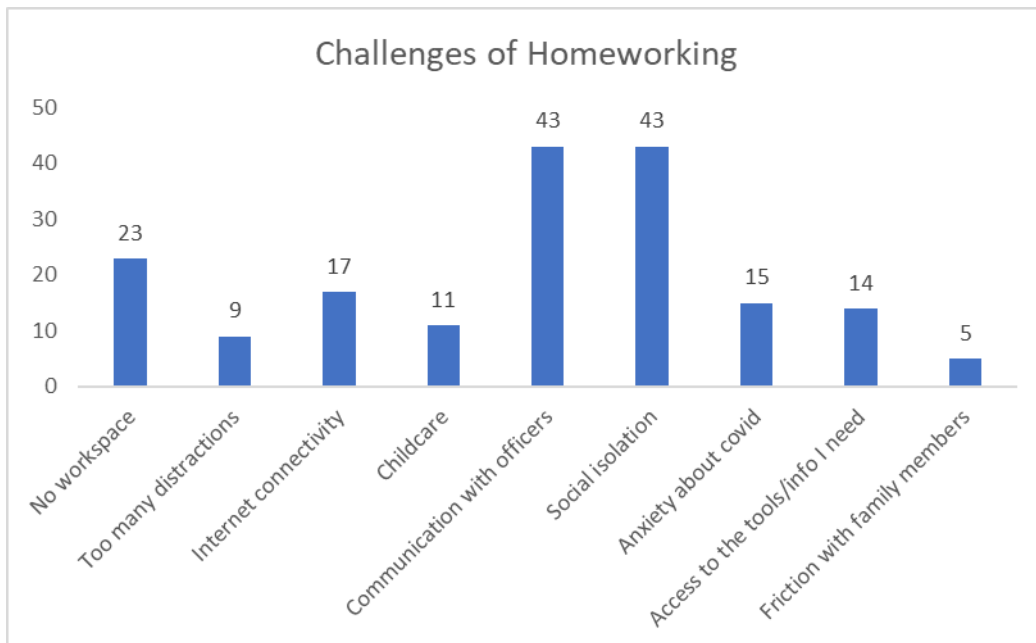
### Clarification on number of zoom meetings

As mentioned at the previous meeting I can confirm that between March and October 2020 there was a total of 809 virtual meetings with almost 5,000 participants across the Council. An updated table of meetings is below which shows data from March 2020 to February 2021:

	Number of Meetings	Participants
March	5	16
April	101	501
May	154	850
June	140	874
July	118	772
August	77	535
September	99	657
October	115	784
November	118	926
December	93	669
January	139	808
February	105	701
<b>Total</b>	<b>1264</b>	<b>8093</b>

### Staff survey results

Given the huge shift in working practices, in the last staff survey (Oct 2020), staff were specifically asked about the challenges and benefits of homeworking. Results are as follows:



## Benefits of homeworking

Theme	Number of Response
Less Distractions	45
Work-life Balance	40
Commuting	35
Productivity	19
Safety	15
Environmental Impact	10
Workwear	6
Comfortable Working Environment	6
IT	5
Temperature/Lighting	3
Convenience of Lunch Breaks	3

We are currently considering the accommodation options going forward and discussing with managers the practicalities or otherwise of increasing and/or formalising home working as an option for the future, taking on board comments highlighted in the staff survey. As the pandemic eases and we return to more 'normal' life we are keen to ensure that we continue to embrace this different way of working where it adds value to our services.

### 3. IMPLICATIONS

#### Legal Implications

N/A

#### Financial Implications

Not yet qualified in full. Some details set out in the body of the report

#### Human Resources Implications

Should there be any changes to working practices, any relevant HR policies will be reviewed or developed in partnership with recognised trade unions.

#### Sustainability/Biodiversity Implications

Development of a carbon plan will include a carbon audit of all TDC operations

#### Equality/Diversity

Any equality impact will be considered a part of the development/review of Hr Policies

#### Risk Management

N/A



#### Compliance with Policies and Strategies

HR policies- as above

Environmental reporting will be in line with Government guidelines

#### Data Protection (GDPR) Implications

N/A

#### Climate Change

As above

#### Ward Member and Lead Member Views – Councillor James

It's been an unusual year of lockdown, virtual meetings and remote working. For some virtual meetings and remote working offer real benefits and advantages and for others there is a preference for dealing with people in person. For the environment there are obvious benefits in reducing travel and this has and will surely continue to assist us in our response to the climate emergency. It will be interesting to see how the workplace/ home working review progresses to ensure that we are able to take the best of all worlds into the future

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

To summarise:

- The environmental benefits of virtual meetings and home working are obvious but what is less clear is whether public participation and quality of output is as high as in a 'normal' environment.
- Our new ways of working will be captured in the carbon audit process and we will then be able to provide members with more details on our carbon usage across the authority.
- Home working is more suited to some job roles than it is to others
- The survey results indicate overwhelming support for live streaming of Council meetings into the future
- Given a choice, members show a slight preference for virtual meetings
- Connectivity and IT issues remain a barrier to some.
- Both officers and councillors acknowledge the lack of social interaction is a disadvantage and most seem to favour an approach where there is a mix between home working and office based working
- Commuting and a reduction in travel is an advantage recognised by both officers and members

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

That members note the contents of this report





**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Consultations: Councillor James, Leader

Contact Officer: Sarah Ayres, HR & Comms Manager

