

## **Governance Committee**

**28 June 2021**

### **Plans for Member Meetings**

#### **Report by Director of Law and Assurance**

**Electoral division: N/A**

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### **Summary**

The Governance Committee agreed at the start of the public health emergency to regularly review plans for all council/committee meetings. A list of the meetings due to be held up to the end of July 2021 is attached at **Appendix 1**. The Government has, through a 'call for evidence', recently consulted on the issue of legal requirements for formal meetings of local authorities, following the recent loss of provision for meetings to take place virtually, and the need for physical meetings to be arranged as a matter of course.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Note the list of formal meetings due to be held up to the end of July 2021, as set out at Appendix 1, and the Council's response to the call for evidence, as set out at Appendix 2; and
- (2) Agree that arrangements for formal Member meetings should continue to be monitored by this Committee, to include a review at its next meeting of plans for meetings during autumn 2021.

### **Proposal**

#### **1. Background and Context**

##### **Current arrangements**

- 1.1 This Committee has reviewed plans for Council and committee meetings during the COVID-19 public health emergency. From April 2020 to May 2021 all formal meetings were held virtually in line with emergency regulations made by the Government. At its meeting in November 2020, the Committee agreed that informal member meetings should continue to be held virtually into the future, beyond COVID-19 restrictions as there is no legal requirement for them to take place at a physical venue.
- 1.2 The regulations allowing meetings to take place virtually lapsed in early May 2021. The Government declined to take any legislative steps to enable the provisions to continue. The following formal decision-making committee meetings are therefore being held in person, in the Council Chamber at County Hall Chichester without the option to join virtually. This will be the

case until the end of July. The position will then be reviewed in line with the next government announcement expected in mid-July. Whilst Scrutiny committees do not take decisions the position taken is that they should be treated in the same way as decision-making meetings.

- Cabinet
- All scrutiny committees
- Governance Committee
- Standards Committee
- Pensions Committee
- Appeals Panels
- Planning and Rights of Way Committee
- Regulation, Audit and Accounts Committee

- 1.3 Due to the continuing public health restrictions the Council Chamber is the only venue large enough to accommodate the necessary number of meeting participants as well as enabling webcasting and a public gallery. Screens have now been fitted in the chamber to increase the number of people who can be accommodated safely. Public attendance at meetings is limited and those wishing to attend are being asked to book in advance.
- 1.4 Arrangements for County Council meetings are different as the Council Chamber cannot (within current public health guidelines) accommodate all members and necessary support officers. The Chairman is consulting group leaders about the arrangements for the County Council meeting on 16 July 2021. It is proposed that this will be virtual meeting involving all members followed by an in-person meeting with a smaller number of members in the Council Chamber to agree any formal decisions in light of the outcomes of the virtual meeting. Other options include those decisions being taken by officers, or the postponement of the meeting pending a review of social distancing measures by the Government in mid-July.
- 1.5 Consideration could be given to arranging a meeting of all seventy members at an outside venue are very limited options within the County. Large sports halls are generally being used as part of the public health response and other venues such as theatre are starting to be set up for their normal activity. The College in Chichester would create challenges in terms of risks of cross-contamination given the age profile of its main users.
- 1.6 Whilst the annual meeting in May needed to take place for the formal decisions on appointments to critical posts following the election the number of critical decisions at meetings of the full Council will be low (other than the budget meeting in February). The costs of hiring an external venue, of ensuring safe access by the public as well as members and the cost and technical challenges of ensuring web-casting may make such arrangements very challenging.

### **Future arrangements**

- 1.7 In light of the Committee's support for virtual meetings in future, in January the Chairman wrote to the Local Government Minister to urge him to ensure that legislative provision was made to enable virtual and hybrid meetings to continue after the temporary legislation expired in May 2021. The Leader also wrote to West Sussex Members of Parliament.

- 1.8 Since then the Council has responded to the Government's call for evidence for local authority remote meetings (attached at **Appendix 2**), reiterating the benefits of the option of virtual meetings and urging it to make permanent provisions to enable councils to work in a modern, efficient way. The Chairman was consulted on the response which was also shared with the County Councils Network.
- 1.9 Depending on the outcome of the consultation and any Government decisions on future regulations to allow remote meetings, for example virtual or hybrid, the Governance Committee will be asked to consider future meeting arrangements and the various types of meetings at a later date.
- 1.10 The Committee will be asked to consider the arrangements for meetings in the autumn at its meeting on 6 September 2021 in the light of the situation at that time. It will not be possible to settle those arrangements given how much may change before then.
- 1.11 The number of meetings being webcast has increased since the pandemic began, as the move to virtual meetings enabled the public to watch and listen to formal meetings. This has continued since May 2021, and the Committee may also wish in September to review future webcasting arrangements.

## **2. Resources**

- 3.1 Formal physical meetings require more officer support in a COVID-secure environment with most meetings requiring five officers from Democratic Services (clerking, advising, providing stewarding and webcasting). Virtual meetings also require more officer support. This increases for larger meetings such as full Council.

### **Factors taken into account**

## **3. Risk Implications and Mitigations**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
Insufficient capacity to support meetings	Decisions will be informed by advice on resources and impact on critical services

## **4. Other Options Considered**

- 6.1 Not applicable.

## **5. Policy alignment and compliance**

- 7.1 There is no equality duty impact arising from this report which is a general overview of plans. The need for the Council to consider the needs of individuals who may wish to participate in member meetings has not changed and will need to be considered in planning the logistics, technology and methods of communication for all council business. There are no social value, crime and disorder, human rights or legal implications. Public health requirements relating to COVID-19 are informing all meeting arrangements.

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**Appendices**

Appendix 1 – List of Council/committee meetings to end July 2021

Appendix 2 – County Council's response to the government consultation on Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence

**Background Papers**

None