

Summary of consultation feedback from county councillors

All members were invited to provide comments on future arrangements for formal meetings, to feed into the Governance Committee meeting on 6 September 2021. Responses were received from 28 number of members (a response rate of 40%), who commented on eight questions as summarised below. Please note that respondents did not comment on all the questions asked.

1. Should any of the current precautions be kept (e.g. wearing masks when moving around the building; some level of social distancing; hand sanitisers available; one-ways systems in buildings; keeping rooms well ventilated; maintaining frequent cleaning regimes)?

Of the 22 members responding to this question, 13 felt that current precautions should be maintained if it enables meetings to continue to be held in person. Some additional comments made by these 13 respondents included:

- The need to review access to toilets
- Ventilation of rooms may be a problem in winter
- That maintenance of these precautions should be for an interim period, before all these rules can safely be put to one side
- That masks should be worn to protect those who are vulnerable and those with vulnerable family members
- That the precautions should continue until it is accepted that 'herd immunity' has been reached.

Of the remaining nine respondents, one commented that only those precautions contained in government guidelines should be maintained. The other eight felt that restrictions should now be removed/relaxed in line with the rest of society and given that all legal restrictions have been removed. A clear desire to 'return to normal' was expressed, although some did suggest that regular cleaning regimes and the ventilation of rooms should be continued (as good practice even when not in Covid times). There was recognition that some people may choose to continue to wear masks, avoid public spaces and work remotely, but that this should be a matter of personal choice.

2. In favour of virtual or physical (in-person) meetings if there is a choice?

27 members responded to this question and overall ten preferred physical meetings (particularly for formal, decision-making meetings), five favoured virtual meetings and 12 a mixture of both depending on the nature of the meeting. There was recognition that travel should be minimised where possible to reduce costs and impact on the Council's climate change commitments, and that virtual meetings would have an ongoing role to play, particularly for informal meetings. Comments included:

- **Physical meetings:** the benefits of physical meetings outweigh those of virtual meetings: you can't "gauge the mood of a meeting" in a virtual format and members tend to feel less confident in speaking and ask fewer questions (as experienced in the induction sessions). Physical meetings enable councillors to get to know each other (and officers) and to have more informal conversations, therefore helping build the relationships and networks that assist them in their role and make for more effective working.

One commented that “conversations flow better when in person and putting screens in between us doesn’t always help understanding or debate”.

- **Virtual meetings:** work well for smaller, informal meetings such as task and finish groups but can be prone to IT problems (including due to individuals’ own broadband capacity). Several commented that this is a more sustainable way of working (both in terms of financial and environmental impact) as well as helping with time management (avoiding lengthy journeys to Chichester). Others commented that Covid is still present and we should not take unnecessary risks, particularly in terms of members who have, or live with, people with underlying health conditions. Working virtually can help those members who work and have other commitments and reducing travel frees up time to deal with casework. One commented that they can be more focused in a virtual meeting
- **Mixture of meeting types:** most respondents favoured retaining a mixture of meeting types, with shorter meetings (e.g. less than two hours), briefings and ad hoc meetings being virtual. Community transmission of Covid is still a concern and is likely to continue to be into the autumn, so meetings that don’t legally have to be in person should be virtual. Where attending meetings in person, it would be helpful if this is for more than one meeting, to make best use of the time. Several commented that scrutiny committees could be virtual, particularly where they are not taking decisions and some suggested that the choice of meeting format should be subject to a vote by the committee. Two members commented that a hybrid approach should be considered, with in-person meetings providing for some virtual attendance.

3. Any changes to the way virtual meetings are managed?

Of the 15 respondents to this question, eight said no changes were needed, with two commenting that they are managed well. Suggested improvements included:

- Further training for staff and members to ensure virtual meetings run smoothly
- One or two dedicated people to manage the technical issues in meetings such as ensuring raised hands are acknowledged and muting microphones where needed
- Explore the cost of a secure electronic voting system (although one member commented that a raised hand should be satisfactory for most votes)
- Increase capabilities in Horsham to support hybrid meetings from there especially if a hybrid format would support reduced travel costs
- Extend use of the mute button and insist that members keep their screens on at all times.

4. Specific/personal concerns or requirements to be taken into account

Two members raised concerns relating to their disabilities/health issues. For them, virtual meetings are particularly important as they remove barriers to their attendance and participation. Travel to and from buildings, moving around buildings, and sitting for long periods of time can cause significant problems for people with disabilities and health conditions (such as back problems).

One commented that “the effect of virtual meetings on people with musculo-skeletal problems seems to be totally ignored by those who keep pushing virtual meetings as a positive way forward”. Another commented that “in virtual meetings I am able to be in a familiar, controlled environment not having to navigate people, obstacles, and greater access to information”.

5. Are members happy to attend a full Council meeting in the Chamber in October with all 70 members (and officers) present in the Chamber or would they prefer other arrangements?

All 28 respondents commented on this question, with 17 happy to attend a full Council meeting in person in the Chamber. Some added that use of the chamber should be subject to measures such as ventilation, screening and cleaning being in place. One commented that this depended on the Covid situation continuing to improve. Two respondents were unsure and felt that the situation should be re-assessed before October, as it is difficult to determine levels of safety this far in advance. Nine members would prefer other arrangements – with two preferring use of another, larger venue which could accommodate social distancing and six specifically stating they would prefer a virtual meeting. One commented that they would not be happy to attend a full Council meeting in person, without suggesting any specific alternative arrangement.

6. Any continuing concerns about in-person attendance at meetings in general?

Of the 14 responses to this question, nine had no specific concerns. Other comments focused on:

- The need to respect public health guidance and not ‘drop our guard too soon’, with one expressing concern that some people might not be vaccinated or might be asymptomatic carriers. Local infection rates and hospitalisation levels should be used as key metrics in determining if physical meetings should take place
- The need to maintain and enforce sensible precautions such as negative lateral flow tests taken before attending, double vaccination certification, normal body temperature and self-isolation if Covid contact has occurred
- A preference for holding virtual meetings, given the difficulty in navigating buildings and travel. Having an option of hybrid and virtual meetings offers greater options for all members to attend and supports reduction in both the economic and environmental costs of in-person meetings.

7. Some meetings (e.g. scrutiny committees) have the option of meeting virtually; how should this be decided? Should there be an assumption they are always virtual?

Five members commented on how the meeting format should be decided, with one suggesting the format should alternate between virtual and physical; one that it should be decided by the Governance Committee; two that committees should decide this for themselves; and another that these committees should have at least one physical meeting per year.

Fifteen members commented on whether there should be an assumption that these meetings are always virtual, with only three agreeing that this should be the case. Nine commented that no assumptions should be made and ten expressed a

preference for these meetings to be held in person where possible. One suggested that scrutiny committees should meet in person, but other smaller committees could be virtual. Those who supported an assumption that meetings should be virtual felt that these meetings work well and that there was a positive impact in terms of accessibility, climate change, reduced travel time and cost to the taxpayer.

Other comments included:

- In order to communicate more effectively, these should be physical meetings and only virtual where circumstances require it
- The Health and Wellbeing Board and the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education should meet virtually as they do not attract the same level of physical public interest that scrutiny committees sometimes can
- Scrutiny committees should be a mix of physical and virtual dependent on public interest
- Scrutiny works better in person and has been poorer for the lack of physical meetings
- All Chairmen should ask the question of all committee members at every meeting moving forward whether they are happy to continue with current arrangements
- There should be an assumption that these meetings should always be held in person unless the Chairman and members of the relevant Committee decide otherwise
- Smaller meetings such as pre-agenda meetings, Business Planning Groups, and other briefings should be held virtually
- Member Days should revert to an in-person format, giving members an opportunity to network and share ideas which they don't have in a virtual format.

8. Any other comments relating to members' needs and expectations about use of/access to Council buildings and offices

- **Use of other venues:** Several members commented on the need to use venues other than Chichester for meetings, and that more use should be made of County Hall North (Horsham) for member meetings, particularly as this is more central. One commented that "we should hold meetings outside Chichester to show that we support the whole of West Sussex". If using County Hall North, parking facilities need to be reviewed.
- **Catering:** There were several comments about catering, with one member requesting the provision of a fridge in the Members' Office for the storage of food. Three commented that hot drinks should be provided again.
- **Individual needs:** The needs of those with disabilities and requiring reasonable adjustments in order to participate in meetings should be taken into account, and more information provided on what adjustments may be made.
- **Technology:** we need to make better use of technology, not just due to Covid, but to facilitate members fully participating when attending remotely if necessary due to any sickness or disability.

- **Access to and use of council buildings:** One member wanted to be able to have access to a desk at County Hall on a frequent basis. Another suggested the guidance which says that members should only attend County Council buildings when absolutely necessary should now be removed, as “this is creating an artificial barrier between members and officers which cannot be healthy in terms of working relationships going forward”. One member commented that a strategic review of the use of Council buildings should be carried out, but that any proposed changes should be considered extremely carefully during a review, as having places to work from (other from home) is very important for staff well-being. A number of long-term problems with remote working were highlighted, including how those new in role (including councillors) learn from those around them, the impact on mental health, isolation, decreased employee visibility, lack of relationships among co-workers, increased distractions, tech issues, understanding project progress and team tasks, effective remote collaboration and service delivery and work prioritisation.