
Governance Committee: Use of hybrid technology for meetings

Background and Context

- 1** The Governance Committee has kept plans for Council and committee meetings under review throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. From April 2020 to May 2021 all formal meetings were held virtually in line with emergency regulations made by the Government. The regulations lapsed in early May 2021. Since that time formal decision-making committee meetings have been held in person, in the Council Chamber at County Hall Chichester, without the option to join virtually. This is the only venue large enough to accommodate the necessary number of participants whilst keeping in line with public health restrictions which were in place until 19 July 2021.
- 2** Whilst government social distancing requirements were mostly removed from 19 July, revised guidance relating to enclosed public spaces was published and specific measures to maintain the safety and wellbeing of everyone using council buildings remain in place in consultation with Public Health colleagues. The Council Chamber continues to be used for formal meetings as the safest venue in terms of the spacing of participants and good ventilation. Public health measures continue to operate and public attendance at meetings is limited with those wishing to attend being asked to book in advance. The Governance Committee continues to keep arrangements under review.
- 3** All members were consulted on future meeting arrangements during July and August. Members were specifically asked if they were happy to attend an in-person full Council meeting in the Council Chamber in October subject to suitable measures being in place. On balance the majority of members said they would support the meeting being held in the Chamber as long as infection rates remain low and that simple precautions are taken including adequate ventilation. Currently infection rates are stable but moderately high.

Proposals

- 4** The technology to enable hybrid meetings (with some participants joining in-person meetings remotely) is now available in the Council Chamber. It cannot lawfully be used to enable any councillor to participate in formal decision-making business but could assist officer, non-committee member or third-party involvement. Depending on the nature of the meeting, where members are unable to attend a meeting in person for good reason, it may be possible for them to join an in-person meeting remotely, but they will not be able to vote on substantive business. Such flexibility will be specifically available for scrutiny committees and some aspects of full Council meetings and for non-cabinet members attending Cabinet meetings.
- 5** For councillor involvement in formal meetings, the Governance Committee has agreed as follows:
 - **County Council:** Members who are uncomfortable with attending an in-person meeting with all members plus officers in the Chamber can take part remotely. Members taking part remotely may not vote on any business but joining virtually allows them to take part in items such as Cabinet question time.

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- **Cabinet:** Cabinet Members will be able to participate virtually in formal meetings but, when doing so, they will not be able to vote. Non-Cabinet Members attending these meetings (scrutiny chairmen and minority party leaders) will be able to participate virtually.
 - **Non-executive decision-making committees** (Governance, Pensions, Planning and Rights of Way, Standards, Regulation, Audit and Accounts): committee members may only lawfully take part in debates and decisions if physically present. Members not on the committee wishing to address the committee may do so virtually.
 - **Scrutiny Committees:** committee members can participate virtually subject to the chairman's discretion (except where the committee is due to take any formal decisions, such as appointing the chairman and vice-chairman).
- 6** Minor changes to Standing Orders to put these proposals into effect are set out at **Appendix 1**. If approved, these changes will take effect immediately.

Recommended

That the proposed changes to Standing Orders, as set out at Appendix 1, be approved.

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Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Proposed changes to Standing Orders

Background papers

None