

Report to Governance Committee

15 November 2021

Plans for Member Meetings

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral division: N/A

Summary

The Governance Committee agreed at the start of the public health emergency to regularly review plans for all formal Council/committee meetings. The Committee is asked to review the arrangements for these meetings in light of the full County Council meeting held on 22 October 2021. The Committee is also asked to consider criteria whereby informal meetings may meet in person.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Review the arrangements for formal Council/committee meetings;
 - (2) Identify any learning from the arrangements for the October 2021 full County Council;
 - (3) Agree the criteria for holding informal meetings in person;
 - (4) Discuss what future meeting arrangements may look like from spring 2022 onwards, and identify any wider consultation required to inform future plans; and
 - (5) Agree to continue to monitor meeting arrangements in light of the latest government guidance and Public Health advice.
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Proposal

1. Background and Context

- 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 as there was 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. Since that time, formal decision-making committee meetings have

been held in person, in the Council Chamber at County Hall Chichester. This venue is large enough to accommodate the necessary number of meeting participants whilst enabling appropriate distancing and ventilation. It is also where the technology is located that enables participants to join in-person meetings remotely and provides full webcasting functionality.

- 1.3 Although the Government removed most social distancing requirements from 19 July, revised guidance relating to enclosed public spaces was published and specific measures to maintain the safety and wellbeing of everyone using County Hall remain in place in consultation with Public Health advice.
- 1.4 It is still recommended where possible to maintain some distancing in formal meetings for the wellbeing of all meeting participants and in consideration of those who may wish to keep more space between themselves and others. This will be kept under review. Distancing in the Council Chamber is not possible for full County Council meetings, so other precautions were put in place for the meeting held in October 2021. This was the first full County Council meeting not to restrict the numbers able to attend in person. Ventilation was maintained, members were encouraged to wear masks when not speaking and were also encouraged to take lateral flow tests within a day before the meeting. When committees and other formal member meetings take place in the Council Chamber it will remain possible also to maintain some safe distancing as a measure to further reduce the risks of infection.
- 1.5 The technology to enable hybrid meetings cannot lawfully be used to enable any councillor to participate in formal decision-making business but does assist officer, non-committee member or third-party involvement. Depending on the nature of the meeting, where committee members are unable to attend a meeting in person for good reason, they may be able to join in-person meetings remotely, but would not be able to speak or vote on substantive business. As agreed by this Committee, councillors may join some in-person meetings remotely, but in most cases cannot vote or count for the purpose of calculation of the quorum of the meeting and can only take part in information and non-decision items only (so may not take part in debates that are part of an agenda item for decision). The exception to this is Cabinet, with Cabinet members able to participate in debates on voting matters but not able to vote. Scrutiny committee members can participate virtually except where the committee is due to take any formal decisions.
- 1.6 During the pandemic, and until May 2021, all formal meetings were webcast to ensure openness and the accessibility of meetings to residents. However, now that most formal meetings are being held in public, the Governance Committee agreed in September 2021 that webcasting should revert to pre-pandemic arrangements, with full County Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committee and Planning and Rights of Way Committee meetings being webcast as standard. Other meetings may be webcast where matters of significant public interest are due to be considered and with the agreement of the relevant chairman. Meetings being held virtually, and which require public access, will be webcast (e.g. the Health and Wellbeing Board).
- 1.7 This Committee agreed in November 2020 that all informal member meetings should be held virtually, given the financial and climate change benefits as well as the saving in travel time for members and all involved. This has also been beneficial to members with work, caring and other

commitments and for those with disabilities. However, as the public health restrictions have eased, it is timely to review this. Feedback from members suggests that for some informal meetings, particularly those where group work is required, the ability to meet in person may be helpful. This may need to be considered on a case-by-case basis – using the test of whether the activity and output would be notably more beneficial by being in person. This can be discussed between the responsible lead officer and the members affected, or the member with most direct involvement in the event.

2. Proposal details

- 2.1 The Council Chamber will continue to be used for all formal Council/committee meetings until at least March 2022, subject to review by this Committee. As well as being well-ventilated and spacious, it is where the technology enabling hybrid meetings is situated. Some degree of distancing will be maintained at meetings where this is possible.
- 2.2 The option for participants to join meetings virtually will be made available within legislative constraints (and as set out at paragraph 1.4). This option is particularly important for those who may be required to isolate or who have a health condition or disability making travel difficult, or where this allows a member to participate in additional meetings as a result or manage caring responsibilities more easily. Scrutiny committees that do not take decisions are able to meet either virtually or in-person, but this option is not available for other formal committees or public Cabinet.
- 2.3 Public attendance at formal meetings will continue to be limited, although the capacity in the public gallery has increased in line with the easing of social distancing requirements. Those wishing to attend are still required to book in advance to help monitor numbers and ensure appropriate stewarding arrangements are in place. This approach will be kept under review in line with Public Health advice.
- 2.4 The full County Council meeting in October worked well, with most councillors (55) attending in person in the Council Chamber and seven joining virtually. A number of precautions were put in place to minimise infection risks and to protect the health and wellbeing of all meeting participants, as set out below:
 - All attendees expected to have assessed their risk, regarding COVID-19, of attending in person and recommended to have completed their primary course of COVID-19 vaccination at least 14 days before attending
 - All attendees encouraged to take a lateral flow test within 24 hours prior to the meeting and to have logged a negative result with the NHS
 - Anyone planning to attend who experiences symptoms of COVID in the days preceding the meeting must isolate and book a PCR test and must not attend the meeting in person
 - Members living with persons who are clinically vulnerable to consider the option to participate virtually
 - All attendees encouraged to wear face coverings (unless exempt) in the chamber when not speaking (N.B. the wearing of face coverings is still advised when moving around council buildings)
 - Increased ventilation in the Council Chamber
 - Only officers required to be present to be in attendance

- Individual wrapped packed lunches were provided

- 2.5 It is proposed that the December and February full County Council meetings be held in the same way, with the same precautions, given the nature of the pandemic and the likelihood of sustained infection rates through the winter. Members will be encouraged to attend the February Council meeting in person as this is the budget-setting meeting and members will only be able to take part in the budget discussion (and any votes) if physically present. For these meetings, Edes House will be available for members' lunches. These arrangements should be kept under review and may need to be reconsidered if government guidance and Public Health advice changes.
- 2.6 Some specific informal member sessions may benefit from meeting face-to-face, particularly those in a workshop style or where smaller breakout group discussions are required. It is therefore proposed that some member development sessions which meet these criteria may be held in person. It is advised that these be held in the Council Chamber to allow hybrid participation and in consideration of those who may wish to keep more space between themselves and others. Breakout sessions may be held in the other committee rooms. All such sessions should also offer the option for members to join remotely (even if only for plenary elements), for the reasons set out at paragraph 1.7.
- 2.7 Looking to the future, the Committee is invited to begin consideration of what the arrangements for meetings should be from spring 2022 onwards. As part of this, it will be important to identify any consultation that may be required to inform future plans, and to be fed into the next review of member meeting arrangements this Committee is due to carry out in early 2022.

3. Consultation, engagement and advice

- 3.1 All county councillors were invited to give feedback on formal meeting arrangements, including those for full Council meetings in summer 2021.
- 3.2 The Governance Committee is invited to identify any consultation required to inform plans for meeting arrangements from spring 2022 onwards, to be feedback to the Committee as part of its ongoing review of member meeting arrangements.

4. Finance

- 4.1 Formal physical meetings require more officer support in a COVID-secure environment, including the provision of stewards to help guide members and the public. Meetings which are webcast also require additional officer support from Democratic Services.

5. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
Harm to the health and wellbeing of councillors, staff and public	Public health precautions to be put in place for all in-person meetings and ongoing advice from Public Health to be provided

Risk	Mitigation
If hybrid technology is used to enable committee members to join meetings remotely, they will not be able to vote and there is a risk that meetings will not be quorate	It is proposed that hybrid technology mainly be used to enable other participants to join meetings remotely
Lack of openness and transparency due to reduced public gallery	Meetings where matters of significant public interest are due to be considered are webcast

6. Policy alignment and compliance

- 6.1 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

None

Background Papers

None