

Future Meeting Arrangements from Spring 2022: Member Survey Feedback

A. Summary

- All councillors were invited to complete a survey on future arrangements for member meetings. 45 out of 70 councillors completed the survey, a response rate of 64%. Of these respondents, 21 (of a possible total of 33) were newly elected in 2021; 24 (of a possible total of 37) were returning members.
- Please note that responses set out below do not always total 45 as some respondents did not answer all questions.
- Responses indicate broad support for the continuation of some of the measures introduced for meetings during the pandemic. Overall, there is support for the hybrid approach to enable some meeting participants to join in-person meetings remotely. There is support for the Council Chamber to continue to be used for formal meetings and for some advisory public health precautions to ensure meeting participants' health and wellbeing. Several respondents commented on the importance of holding formal meetings in person, whilst others recognised the reduced carbon footprint of virtual and hybrid meetings.
- The importance of taking into account the requirements of those with disabilities and health conditions was highlighted.
- Some members suggested that the precautions in place for meetings should continue to be reviewed, as arrangements may need to change depending on public health advice (whether this be to strengthen or relax these); that there is a balance to be struck between managing risk and a desire to 'return to normal', in line with other sectors of society.
- Most felt that informal meetings should continue to be held virtually in general, but with the potential (depending on the nature of the topic/issue, and with input from the chairman or lead member) for some to be held in person, particularly where face-to-face interaction is beneficial. The importance of in person networking and discussion was highlighted several times.
- Suggestions raised included exploring the use of other locations for meetings and the provision of technology to enable hybrid meetings in rooms other than the Council Chamber. There is also a need to confirm and clarify the procedural rules relating to remote participation, including voting.
- A large majority of respondents find the IT kit provided by the Council enables them to participate in virtual meetings, but some are unclear on the additional IT kit and software available to support them. Some commented on the need for printing capability. The Member Development Group will be reviewing the survey responses relating to IT and training/guidance, but the survey feedback highlights a need to confirm and clarify what equipment/software is available to members (and the reasons for why some is not).

B. Survey responses – meeting arrangements

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
1. Should the Council Chamber continue to be used for all formal meetings (enabling webcasting and remote participation)?	42	3	0
2. Should some social distancing remain in place for formal meetings in the Council Chamber where possible? (i.e. for all other than full County Council meetings, where it isn't possible)?	34	9	2

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
3. Should members continue to be encouraged to take the advisory precautions listed below for in-person meetings?			
a) All to have assessed their risk from COVID-19 of attending in person and asked to have completed their course of vaccination at least 14 days before attending	38	5	1
b) 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	29	13	2
c) Anyone with symptoms of COVID-19 in the days preceding the meeting must not attend the meeting in person without a negative PCR test	35	3	6
4. Should the advisory precautions listed below remain in place for in-person full County Council meetings, as social distancing is not possible for these meetings in the Council Chamber:			
a) Members living with persons who are clinically vulnerable to consider the option to participate virtually	37	3	3
b) All attendees encouraged to wear face coverings (unless exempt) in the chamber when not speaking	29	14	2
c) Increased ventilation in the Council Chamber	35	5	4
5. Do you agree that committee members unable to attend a formal meeting in person for good reason (e.g. required to isolate/have a health condition) should be able to join remotely, where permissible under Standing Orders, recognising that they may not speak or vote on substantive business?	43	1	1

	Yes	No	Don't know	For each chairman to determine
6. Do you agree that the option for the following participants to join formal meetings virtually should continue to be made available?				
a) All scrutiny committee members (at meetings where formal votes aren't required)	26	6	0	13
b) External witnesses	25	3	0	17
c) Officers and others making presentations/answering questions	23	4	0	16
7. Do you agree that most informal member meetings should continue to be virtual (saving time, travel costs and helping to	28	5	0	11

	Yes	No	Don't know	For each chairman to determine
meet the Council's climate change commitments)?				
8. Are there any informal meetings you think would be better in person? (see comments below for suggestions made)	11	13	6	14

	Yes	No	Don't know	Open to suggestion
9. Are there any changes you would like to see to the way virtual or hybrid meetings are managed?	9	4	1	31

Additional comments made by respondents in relation to these questions are summarised below:

- a) **General comments:** That arrangements will need to be assessed on an ongoing basis, reflecting the wider rules and public health situation. One member suggested that formal arrangements are not necessary as people are capable of making their own judgements. Consideration of the use of other locations for meetings, e.g. Horsham and of providing hybrid meeting and webcasting technology in other smaller meeting rooms. The importance of face-to-face meetings for 'proper debate and scrutiny' was highlighted.
- b) **Remote participation/hybrid meetings:** The need to continue to enable remote participation for those who may not be able to attend in person (particularly those members with vulnerable households) and to help reduce travel, limiting environmental and cost impacts. One member commented that remote attendance at meetings should only be due to medical circumstances and another that it should be only be with prior notice to the chairman. Another commented that, as a member with disabilities, they would be encouraged if the Council was willing to support and advance equality for elected members, to write to the Government and advocate for remote access to be viewed as a reasonable adjustment, not just in terms of Covid-19 but also to enable inclusion and full participation in meetings for those with disabilities and for carers. A number of respondents felt that the chairmen of meetings should have a role in deciding on whether there should be remote participation. Three members felt that officers presenting at in-person meetings should be present, rather than being able to join remotely. One commented that virtual scrutiny committee meetings should be the exception rather than the norm.
- c) **Rules and procedures:** Some commented on the need to confirm/clarify the procedural rules relating to virtual attendance, particularly where this means members are not able to take part in votes. There is some confusion as to the rules on this.
- d) **Advisory precautions:** Most comments on the advisory precautions (such as the recommendation to wear masks, take lateral flow tests, not attend meetings if suffering Covid-related symptoms etc) supported these as long as they were in line with the current public health advice/government guidance. However three

respondents commented that members should be allowed to take these kinds of decisions for themselves. One member strongly disagreed with the advice that people should have completed their course of Covid vaccinations, as this is a private matter for individual choice. Another commented that routine, daily testing of healthy people is excessive, and it should be left to the individual to decide whether or not to test themselves. Two members commented that the precautions should apply to all people attending meetings in person, not just members. Some commented that wearing masks is uncomfortable during meetings and questioned its effectiveness. In terms of increased ventilation, most comments accepted this within reason but as long as the overall temperature in meeting rooms is kept at a reasonable level.

e) **Informal meetings:** Whilst most respondents agreed that informal meetings should continue to be held virtually, some commented that there is a loss of networking and interaction, so for some meetings it may be helpful to be in person. Some suggested that this should be for the chairman or meeting organiser to determine, depending on the meeting content and format. Technical issues were cited as a reason for holding these in person (avoiding some of the problems that can occur in virtual meetings) as well as the lower public health risk of smaller meetings. One member stated stating that “the level of engagement and questioning was notably lower during the induction sessions last year, and I think the whole process suffered considerably as a result”. Another commented that “as a new member it is important for me to work with other councillors and officers face to face to get to know them”. Informal meetings identified by some as being better in person included:

- Member training/development sessions and briefings (with budget briefings specifically mentioned by one)
- Where complex discussion is needed
- Breakout group discussions (although some commented that these can work well virtually)
- One-to-ones, chairmen’s briefings, pre-agenda meetings, task and finish groups and business planning groups (although these were also highlighted by several respondents as working well virtually)

f) **How virtual or hybrid meetings are managed:** most respondents (31) were open to suggestion to changes to how these meetings are managed, whilst nine members identified specific changes, summarised below:

- **Voting:** no more individual member voting at WSCC meetings (takes too long); those joining formal meetings remotely should be allowed to vote and speak on substantive issues; delegate votes to group leaders/deputies by proxy; to consider remote voting option as a reasonable adjustment for people with a diagnosed disability, to encourage and facilitate such members
- **Timing:** to start strictly on time (regardless of whether members joining remotely are late); to stick to the timings on the agenda and to the time allocated for discussion/questions; reduce the lunch time to half an hour for both in person and virtual meetings
- **Meeting format:** use breakout rooms in member sessions/briefings
- **Technical issues:** where meeting participants have IT issues (e.g. poor Wi-Fi connection), they should be politely asked to log out, rather than wasting time in meetings sorting these issues out. There should be training on using the technology to speed virtual meetings up. The ‘chat’ should be removed from

Teams meetings, with any useful links/notes being sent out immediately afterwards instead.

- **Minutes:** individual members' comments and questions should be attributed to them by name in the minutes, as this is not always clear in a virtual meeting.

C. Survey responses – IT and other equipment, training and guidance

- a) **Participation in virtual/hybrid meetings:** 40 respondents agreed that the IT kit provided by the Council enables them to join and participate in virtual and hybrid meetings, with only three saying it did not and one unsure. Those who have experienced problems highlighted the need for following:
- An additional screen when in virtual meetings, to be able to read documents online as well as see the meeting
 - Home printing capability
 - The ability to connect their Council email/calendar to their smartphone
 - Improved reliability of the IT, which can affect levels of participation, to include improved battery life of the laptops provided
 - An IT specialist to suggest how to improve home broadband
 - An officer on standby to help members having difficulty joining/staying in meetings
 - The ability to use Zoom
- b) **Requests for additional IT equipment:** 10 respondents have requested some of the additional IT equipment that is available; 19 have not and 12 were not aware this was available. The standard equipment consists of a laptop, a laptop bag, a headset and a mouse. The additional equipment available is a separate keyboard, separate monitor, an ethernet adaptor, a docking station and a USB 4-port hub. Some additional peripheral IT equipment may be provided on a case-by-case basis to meet specific identified needs, in consultation with the relevant Group Leader and the Cabinet Member for Support Services and Economic Development.
- c) **Using councillors' basic allowance to purchase equipment:** Seven of the members responding to the survey have used the basic allowance to purchase equipment to assist them, as set out below:
- Pack of printing paper (2)
 - Printer cartridge (1)
 - Officer chair (2)
 - Air pods for better hearing/communication (1)
 - Cable for a monitor (1)
- d) **Training or guidance to help participate in meetings (in person or remotely):** the majority (35) of members responding did not feel they needed any further training or guidance, with only one saying they did (unspecified).
- e) **Training or guidance to help in your role as a councillor, given the increase in virtual working and the need for an online presence (e.g. via social media):** 27 did not feel they needed any further training or guidance, ten was unsure and seven felt they did. Of these seven, only two identified a specific need: one was for training in exploiting social media channels more; the other was how to conduct and respond in online meeting.

D. General comments

Survey respondents were invited to provide general comments on any continuing concerns, personal requirements relating to meeting arrangements and relating to needs and expectations about use of/access to Council buildings. 25 comments were made, as summarised below:

- **Benefits of virtual working:** several commented on how useful it has been to be able to join meetings remotely, particularly those with vulnerable people in their households and those with disabilities or health issues. Others commented on the savings of time, costs and to the environment, with one wanting to see the restoration of the legal right to hold any meeting remotely. Another commented that meetings should be virtual unless there is a good reason to travel to Chichester, in line with the overarching climate change objective.
- **Dis-benefits of virtual working:** One member commented on physical (back) problems due to excessive time spent in front of a computer since March 2020. Other commented that virtual working prohibits councillors in having good working relationships with officers and that new councillors are way behind the knowledge and relationships of established councillors.
- **Returning to/accessing Council buildings:** Some commented on a desire to return to office-based work, with unrestricted access to County Hall so that members could consult officers in person when necessary. Another felt that officers should be back in the office, particularly where home working is difficult. Two expressed a desire to open up as soon as possible and return to pre-covid arrangements.
- **Venue of meetings:** We should try to meet (if we do in-person meetings) around the county, not always in Chichester which is at one extreme end.
- **Public health-related precautions in meetings:** Two members commented on ventilation in the Council Chamber – with one finding it too cold and another asking for this to continue regardless of the weather. Another commented that we need to “keep things sensible and in proportion”. The specific impact on people with disabilities was highlighted, with some being unable to socially distance and therefore placed at greater risk in comparison.
- **Technical/IT and training:** One commented on the need for members to take part in virtual meetings appropriately, switching cameras off when not speaking. Another requested advice regarding their home working station set up. The potential cyber security issues relating to the interconnectivity of numerous devices/routers was raised. One asked for more information on the additional IT equipment available and another asked for help in arranging meeting rooms. One commented on how helpful staff are with technical issues.
- **Communications (emails/printing/post):** Some different communications issues were highlighted, including the need to receive Council emails on personal smartphones; the ability to print at home; the importance of post and hard copy documents received at County Hall being forwarded promptly to members (or members being notified that they are at County Hall awaiting collection).