

Report to Governance Committee

7 February 2022

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 note the plans for meetings to the end of March 2022, as agreed at its last meeting, and to consider future meeting arrangements from April 2022 onwards. A survey of all members was carried out in December/January to inform the Committee's discussions and feedback from this is included in the report.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Review the arrangements for formal Council/committee meetings to end of March 2022;
 - (2) Discuss what future meeting arrangements may look like from April 2022 onwards, taking into account feedback from the all-member survey; and
 - (3) Agree to continue to monitor meeting arrangements in light of the latest government guidance and Public Health advice and undertake a further full review at the Committee's meeting in September.
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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. Since May 2021, when the regulations enabling meetings to be virtual lapsed, all formal decision-making meetings have been held in person in the Council Chamber at County Hall Chichester. Although the Government removed most social distancing requirements from 19 July, revised guidance relating to enclosed public spaces was published and some measures to maintain the safety and wellbeing of everyone using County Hall therefore remain in place in consultation with Public Health. The Government's next review of Covid-related guidance is due at the end of March 2022 and the indication is that some measures may be removed.
- 1.2 In November 2021 the Committee agreed that all formal meetings held in person would continue to be held in the Council Chamber at least until the end

of March 2022. This is large enough to accommodate the necessary number of meeting participants, enables appropriate distancing and ventilation and, most importantly, is where the technology is located that enables participants to join remotely. It also provides full webcasting functionality. For full County Council meetings held in person and where social distancing is not possible, additional precautionary measures have been put in place to minimise infection risks and to protect the health and wellbeing of all meeting participants.

- 1.3 The option for participants to join meetings virtually is made available within legislative constraints. This option is particularly important for those who may need to isolate or who have a health condition or disability making travel difficult, or where it means a member with caring responsibilities can participate more easily. It is proposed that members will 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. 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.
- 1.4 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.
- 1.5 Informal meetings continue to be held virtually, but where meeting in person would be particularly helpful, this will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

2. Proposal details

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to note the arrangements for formal meetings to the end of March, as listed at **Appendix 1**.
- 2.2 It is proposed that the 18 February 2022 full County Council meeting is held in person with the following precautionary measures agreed by this Committee in November 2021:
 - All attendees are expected to have assessed their risk, regarding COVID-19, of attending in person and recommended to have completed their primary and secondary courses of COVID-19 vaccination and, if applicable, their booster or third vaccination at least seven days before attending.
 - All attendees are encouraged to take a lateral flow test within 24 hours prior to the meeting and to have logged a negative result with the NHS. Those with a positive result should not attend the meeting.
 - 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.
 - If a household member tests positive for COVID, attendees should stay away unless they have been fully vaccinated and had a negative lateral flow test result
 - Members living with persons who are clinically vulnerable should assess the risk and consider if there is an option to attend virtually

- All attendees are encouraged wear face coverings (unless exempt) in the chamber when not speaking (N.B. the wearing of face coverings is still required when moving around council buildings)
- Increased ventilation in the Council Chamber will be in place and so all those attending should dress accordingly
- Only officers required to be present to be in attendance

- 2.3 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 are not be able to speak or vote on substantive business or count for the purpose of calculation of the quorum of the meeting. Scrutiny committee members can participate virtually except where the committee is due to take any formal decisions.
- 2.4 Since September 2021 webcasting of formal meetings has covered full County Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committee and Planning and Rights of Way Committee meetings 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).
- 2.5 It was 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. In November 2021 this Committee agreed that some informal meetings may be held in person where the ability to meet in person is helpful (e.g. where group work is required). This is 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 and is agreed through discussion between the responsible lead officer and the members affected, or the member with most direct involvement in the event.
- 2.6 As well as reviewing plans up to the end of March, the Committee is invited to consider the arrangements for meetings for the rest of the new Municipal year taking into account the feedback received through the all-member survey (see paragraph 3).
- 2.7 The arrangements set out at paragraphs 2.2 to 2.5 should continue to be kept under review and may need to be revised as and when government guidance and Public Health advice changes. Whilst restrictions have been relaxed recently, the situation is unpredictable and it is therefore proposed that the Committee continues to monitor the situation. It is suggested that a further review is undertaken at the Committee's September meeting to cover arrangements for the autumn onwards.
- 2.8 Given the support shown in the member survey for hybrid meetings, where permissible, officers will explore the practicalities and cost implications of hybrid equipment for use in the other committee rooms at County Hall and, potentially, at other locations. Currently hybrid meetings can only be held using the equipment in the Council Chamber. This will be feedback to the Committee in September as part of its review of member meetings.

- 2.9 At the County Council's informal meeting on 17 December the Leader agreed to write to the Government to urge the reintroduction of lawful arrangements for formal council business to take place over virtual platforms, as was the case between March 2020 and May 2021. The Government has responded to the recent lobbying to confirm that it does not plan to reintroduce the temporary legislation the current time. The Government's response to its call for evidence last summer on the pros and cons of local authority remote meetings is awaited. Should it decide to make any changes to regulations in future, the Governance Committee will be asked to consider the implications for the Council's future meeting arrangements.

3. Consultation, engagement and advice

- 3.1 All county councillors were invited to complete a questionnaire giving feedback on future meeting arrangements. 45 of the 70 councillors responded, a response rate of 64%. A summary of the key points raised is set out below, with more detailed findings at **Appendix 2**.
- 3.2 Responses indicate broad support for the continuation of most 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 where permissible. There is also 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. The need for these precautions to continue to be reviewed was highlighted, as arrangements may need to change depending on public health advice (whether this is to be strengthened or relaxed). Several members commented on the balance to be struck between managing risk and a desire to 'return to normal', in line with other sectors of society.
- 3.3 Other key points raised:
- The importance of in person networking and discussion.
 - The positive impact on the environment of reducing travel to meetings where possible, through the ability to join remotely.
 - That whilst most agreed that informal meetings should continue to be held virtually, there should be 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 taking account of the needs of those with disabilities and health conditions.
 - Some requests to explore the use of other locations for meetings and the technology to enable hybrid meetings in rooms other than the Council Chamber.
 - To ensure all members understand the procedural rules relating to remote participation, including voting.
 - To ensure all members are aware of the IT hardware and software available to support them.

3.4 The Member Development Group will be reviewing the survey responses relating to IT and training/guidance.

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.

4.2 The cost implications of any additional equipment to allow hybrid meetings to be held in other rooms apart from the Council Chamber will be considered.

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
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

Appendix 1 – List of Council/committee meetings to end March 2022

Appendix 2 – Summary of consultation feedback from county councillors

Background Papers: None