

## Report to Governance Committee

9 May 2022

### Member Meetings Update

### Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral division: N/A

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## Summary

The Governance Committee agreed at the start of the public health emergency to regularly review arrangements for all member meetings. This update confirms the arrangements in place, which reflect what the Committee agreed at its last meeting as well as the more recent easing of public health precautions. The Committee is due to undertake a further full review of meeting arrangements in September 2022. The report also gives the viewing figures for webcasts of meetings during 2021/2022.

## Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Note the arrangements for member meetings as set out in Appendix 1;
  - (2) Note the webcasting viewing figures set out in Appendix 2; and
  - (3) Agree to the webcasting of Health and Wellbeing Board meetings for a one-year trial period.
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## Proposal

### 1. Background and Context

- 1.1 This Committee has reviewed plans for member meetings during the public health emergency. Most restrictions put in place in response to the pandemic have now been removed. Formal decision-making meetings continue to be held in person, with the option of joining remotely open to some participants within legislative constraints. Informal meetings are mainly held virtually, but with the option for these to be held in person where face-to-face interaction is beneficial.
- 1.2 At its last meeting the Committee reviewed feedback from an all-member survey, which showed support for the hybrid approach where this is permissible but also emphasised the importance of in-person networking. Since that meeting, most of the public health precautions relating to meetings have been removed, including the need for social distancing and limits on the public gallery. A summary of current arrangements is at **Appendix 1**. This provides a reference point which can be revised as appropriate. It also responds to the member feedback by providing a common understanding of procedural rules for remote participation and of IT support available to enable remote working.

- 1.3 Options for the technology to enable hybrid meetings at venues other than the Council Chamber are being explored and details will be included in the next review report in September.
- 1.4 Between April 2020 and May 2021, regulations were in place enabling all formal Council/committee meetings to be held virtually. All such meetings were webcast to ensure the public were able to see/hear proceedings, providing openness and transparency. These regulations lapsed in May 2021 and since then all formal decision-making meetings have been required to be held in person with a physical public gallery.
- 1.5 In September 2021, this Committee reviewed webcasting and agreed that it should revert to pre-pandemic arrangements. Meetings of full County Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees and Planning and Rights of Way Committee have been 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. Any meetings being held virtually, and which require public access, will be webcast. This did include Health and Wellbeing Board meetings which, until recently, were being held virtually. Now that these are being held in person, its Chairman has requested that they be webcast due to the level of public interest in the work of the Board.
- 1.6 The national position regarding local authority meetings is that the legislation has reverted to pre-pandemic arrangements. This means that formal decision-making meetings and voting may not take place virtually. In response to lobbying on this matter, the Government has confirmed that it does not plan to change this legislation. Should it decide to make any changes to regulations in future, the Governance Committee will be updated and asked to consider the implications for the Council's future meeting arrangements.

## **2. Proposal details**

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to note the arrangements for member meetings set out in **Appendix 1**. These are in line with the procedures agreed by this Committee and with national guidance and will continue to be kept under review by the Committee. It is due to carry out a full review of meeting arrangements from in September 2022.
- 2.2 Changes introduced since the Committee's last meeting in February 2022 include the lifting of social distancing (and other public health precautions). There is no longer a requirement for the public to book to attend meetings in the public gallery, and the capacity of the public gallery has returned to normal. The only exception to this is where a meeting may have an agenda item of significant public interest. In such cases, there may be a need to have a booking system in place for the public gallery.
- 2.3 **Appendix 2** shows the webcasting figures for meetings webcast during 2021/22 and provides comparisons with the figures for 2020/21 and 2019/20. Webcasts are available via the Council's website live during the meeting and then available from the archive for six years.
- 2.4 The Committee is asked to agree that the meetings of the Health and Wellbeing Board be webcast for a one-year trial. The Board is a forum for senior representatives of Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Public Health, the NHS, District and Borough Councils and the Voluntary Sector to come together

to discuss plans to improve the health and wellbeing of the residents of West Sussex. During the pandemic interest in Public Health issues raised the profile of the Board and webcasting could help maintain this and aid understanding of and engagement with public health. An assessment of the trial to judge whether it should become permanent will be carried out at the end of the year.

### **3. Consultation, engagement and advice**

- 3.1 All county councillors were invited to take part in a survey on future meeting arrangements in January 2022. The results of this survey were reported to Governance Committee in February 2022 and have informed plans for meeting arrangements. The Member Development Group has reviewed the survey responses relating to IT and training/guidance for members and guidance on this has now been updated and reissued.
- 3.2 The Chairman and Group Leaders were consulted on the easing of public health precautions relating to member meetings and a communication was sent to all members in March 2022 confirming the changes.
- 3.3 The current Council/committee meeting arrangements reflect the latest Government and public health advice.

### **4. Finance**

- 4.1 Meetings which are webcast require additional officer support from Democratic Services. The Health and Wellbeing Board meets four times per year and support for webcasting its meetings can be met from within existing resources. This will be reviewed as part of the assessment of the proposed one-year trial.
- 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 and reported to the Committee when it reviews future meeting arrangements again in September.

### **5. Risk Implications and Mitigations**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
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 (e.g. officers presenting, external witnesses) to join meetings remotely

### **6. Policy alignment and compliance**

- 6.1 There is no equality duty impact arising from this report which is a general overview of arrangements. 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 save the need to ensure that council meetings take place in line with statutory requirements. Public health requirements relating to COVID-19 have been considered.

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**Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Guide to Member Meetings and Procedures, May 2022

Appendix 2 – Webcasting Data

**Background Papers**

None