

Meeting arrangements

Timing of Meetings

The County Council is one of the largest councils in the country and holds several hundred meetings each year, on its range of political governance arrangements – Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees, non-Executive Committees and County Local Committees. A wide range of informal meetings are also part of the political governance arrangements, ranging from panels, boards, groups and pre-agenda meetings.

Because of the number of meetings held, West Sussex has long had a pattern of meetings that allows for up to three meetings a day, avoiding clashes for individual members – these are morning, afternoon and evening. Naturally, some of these meeting times will be more or less convenient for different members depending upon their personal circumstances. One particular challenge in West Sussex is the distance that some members will need to travel to reach County Hall, Chichester – a one-way journey from Crawley or East Grinstead can take an hour and a half.

Recognising that morning meetings will generally be easier for those members with caring responsibilities for school-age children, the morning meetings have a start time of 10.30 am, allowing school drop-offs in places like East Grinstead and Crawley before travelling to County Hall, Chichester. These meetings traditionally finish at 1 pm, allowing time to return for school pick-ups. Some meetings regularly finish later than this, but that is down to agenda planning for each committee.

The afternoon meetings begin at 2.15 pm and are typically shorter meetings – Governance, Standards and Rights of Way Committees are three that are organised in this time slot.

The evening meetings held are the County Local Committees – this is because they are local meetings held in the local area. A county-wide committee taking place in the evening at County Hall, Chichester, might meet from 7 pm to 10 pm, making a very late night for members travelling back to further parts of the county. The evening meetings of CLCs are usually three meetings a year for each member, giving capacity for attending other meetings in their divisions – most parish councils and district council meetings take place in the evening, which a local member may try to attend, or likewise residents' associations and other community groups. Limiting the number of evening meetings of the County Council makes it much more achievable for members on other councils to fulfil the additional roles.

Meeting Dates

Another consequence of a very busy member diary is that meeting days are not always consistent throughout the year – Dates are consistent in many cases:

Monday – Governance, Standards and Regulation, Audit and Accounts Committees.

Tuesday – Cabinet, Planning and Rights of Way Committees

Thursday – Executive Leadership Team meets in the afternoon.

Friday – County Council

The main committees that are not always consistent are the Scrutiny Committees – these are scheduled mostly for Wednesdays and Thursdays, with some Mondays and Fridays to ensure that the five committees meet reasonably close together in a cycle, with the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee coming last.

Officers preparing the member diary attempt to provide as much consistency as possible in sticking to certain meetings on certain days, but it is not possible to achieve this entirely with the current range of meetings. Meetings are not scheduled within the published local authority school holidays. The main exception to this is that the February County Council meeting is often within the half term holiday as a necessity because six weeks' notice must be given to district councils of the amount of council tax to be collected.

Virtual Meetings

It is clear under the Local Government Act 1972 that for formal meetings, a member is only present at a meeting if they are in the room at the time. This is important for voting and for counting towards a quorum for the meeting. It is possible for other participants to take part virtually, such as a witness taking part via a video-link.

Formal Virtual meeting arrangements are temporarily in place from April 2020 to May 2021 due to the public health emergency, so it is possible that greater flexibility may be retained after this.

Such requirements are not in place for informal meetings, as by definition, they are informal and have no delegated powers. Video-conferencing is now available routinely between County Hall, Chichester and County Hall North, Horsham. For any informal meeting, such as Business Planning Groups, Task and Finish Groups, Pre-agenda meetings, informal Panels or Boards, these meetings can include virtual participation, with some participants taking part in Horsham. This can be requested at any time. (The roll-out of 'Skype for Business' as telephony within the County Council also makes virtual participation possible from any location with a strong broadband connection using a Windows 10 County Council laptop. There are plans to install screens in Committee Rooms 1 and 2, so these could also be utilised for virtual attendance at informal meetings.)