

<b>Governance Committee</b>	
<b>6 July 2020</b>	<b>Part I</b>
<b>Plans for Member Meetings during the Covid-19 Emergency</b>	
<b>Report by the Director of Law and Assurance</b>	

### **Summary**

This Committee agreed to review at each of its meetings the plans for member meetings during the current public health emergency. This report focuses on arrangements for an additional County Council meeting proposed for the early autumn.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Agree the plans for a County Council meeting in September 2020 (paragraphs 2.1 to 2.3);
- (2) Agree that the organisation's capacity and resources to support member meetings should continue to be monitored in liaison with members (paragraph 2.4); and
- (3) Identify any consultation required on arrangements for future member meetings in advance of its September meeting (paragraph 2.5).

## **Proposal**

### **1. Background and Context**

- 1.1 This Committee has been reviewing plans for member meetings during the Covid-19 public health emergency. It agreed at its meeting on 22 June that an additional County Council meeting should be arranged between the meetings on 17 July and 16 October 2020. This was to compensate for the cancellation of the Council meetings in April and May due to the public health emergency and to provide opportunity for the discussion of important Council business and issues affecting West Sussex.
- 1.2 During the emergency, all formal council/committee meetings have been held virtually, but a flexible approach will be taken to future arrangements pending any changes in government guidance relating to public meetings. As at 24 June the position is that meetings must continue as virtual but advice from the Local Government Association (LGA) is that it is raising with Government whether meetings can be resumed in any physical form. The Prime Minister's statement of 23 June, announcing some easing of the lockdown, did not refer to council meetings. It did however confirm that "courts, probation services, police stations and other public services will increasingly resume face-to-face proceedings" from 4 July. The LGA is

enquiring if this could similarly apply to council meetings. The legal advice states that the current Regulations in place (Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (England) Regulations 2020) would need to be amended, or guidance issued, to allow for councillors to meet face to face if they wish to. The LGA is pushing for these changes to be made so councils can decide on the best local solution - whether to continue virtual arrangements or move to a 'hybrid' model.

- 1.3 It is therefore possible that hybrid meetings may be held in future (with some councillors attending in person and others joining virtually). The technical solutions to support such meetings are being explored, but the Committee is asked to note that all hybrid member meetings will need to be held in the Council Chamber due to IT and webcasting requirements. As a result, the calendar of meetings may need to be revised to avoid any meeting clashes. Alternative video-conferencing solutions to Skype are currently being trialled and the Committee will be kept updated on progress with all these developments.

## **2. Proposals**

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to agree the date and format of an additional Council meeting. It is proposed that this be held in September rather than August, to maximise attendance and ensure members with school-age children are able to attend. The date options are:
- Friday 4 September (week of the summer bank holiday)
  - Friday 11 September (member meetings in the diary)
  - Friday 18 September
- 2.2 Whilst any of these dates can be supported, it is recommended that 18 September would be the best option. This avoids lead-in and report and group preparation time during August as well as being during a week with relatively few other formal member meetings. The next meeting would remain as 16 October.
- 2.3 It is proposed that the agenda and timetable of this meeting should follow normal County Council meeting procedures, allowing the submission of Notices of Motion, Cabinet Member Question Time and written questions, with application of the usual time limits on speeches. The agenda may change should there be a need to include business currently not planned. Breaks and some time limits to items may be advisable depending on the final arrangements for the meeting.
- 2.4 At its meeting in May 2020, the Committee recognised that the organisation's capacity to support some member meetings might be limited during the emergency period and agreed to minimise activity to focus on priority and essential business. As the emergency eases, it is proposed that this should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis and in liaison with the Chairman, Group Leaders, Committee Chairmen and Scrutiny Committee Business Planning Groups as appropriate. It remains important to monitor capacity and resources.
- 2.5 The calendar of meetings to the end of 2020 will be reviewed at the next meeting of this Committee in September, to include whether or not to

resume County Local Committee meetings and what format these might take. The Committee is asked to identify any consultation required in advance of this meeting. This may include county councillors, committee chairmen, Executive Directors/Directors and partners (e.g. NHS organisations that have seats on the Health and Wellbeing Board; co-optee members of committees; Arun District Council on plans for the Arun CLCs).

### **3. Resources**

- 3.1 There are no significant resource implications relating to the proposals contained in this report. Council staff, both within Democratic Services and across the organisation, have been involved in supporting the corporate response to Covid-19. This has been easing, but it will be important to monitor capacity to support member meetings. Virtual meetings require more support from Democratic Services staff, so there are increased resource implications for such meetings.

### **Factors taken into account**

#### **4. Consultation**

- 4.1 There has not been opportunity to consult members prior to the publication of this report. The Chairman and Group Leaders have been consulted on the proposed arrangements for the July County Council meeting. The Committee is asked to consider any wider consultation required relating to future meeting plans.

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

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigating Action (in place or planned)</b>
Lack of democratic debate on issues	Plans will be led by members following consultation within groups
Insufficient capacity to support meetings	Decisions will be informed by advice on resources and impact on critical services

#### **6. Other Options Considered**

- 6.1 Options will be considered within the Committee's debate.

#### **7. Equality Duty**

- 7.1 There is no equality duty impact arising from this report. The needs of individuals who may wish to participate in member meetings will need to be considered in planning the technology and methods of communication for all council business.

#### **8. Social Value, Crime and Disorder Act and Human Rights Implications**

- 8.1 None

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**Appendices**

None

**Background Papers**

None