

Governance Committee

7 September 2020

Plans for Member Meetings during the COVID-19 Emergency

Report by Director of Law and Assurance

Electoral division: N/A

Summary

The Governance Committee agreed to review plans for council/committee meetings during the COVID-19 public health emergency at each of its meetings. This report sets out meeting arrangements up to December 2020. The Committee is specifically asked to consider whether County Local Committee meetings due to be held in October/November 2020 should resume. County Local Committees were suspended in summer 2020 due to the public health emergency and the problems associated with arranging virtual meetings at local venues.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Consider and approve the list of council/committee meetings to the end of December 2020 (Appendix 1);
 - (2) Agree proposals for County Local Committee meetings in the autumn, as set out at paragraph 2.5 (and detailed at paragraph 2.3.2);
 - (3) Agree proposals at paragraph 2.6 for a review of the local/community role of county councillors by the Member Development Group; and
 - (4) Agree that the Council's capacity and resources to support member meetings should continue to be monitored by this Committee in liaison with all members.
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Proposal

1. Background and Context

- 1.1 This Committee has reviewed plans for Council/committee meetings during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Since April 2020 all formal meetings have been held virtually but kept under review pending changes in government guidance. Skype has been used by the Council but, from September 2020, MS Teams will be used for a video conference platform for formal meetings. Skype continues to be useful for less formal meetings. Use may depend upon suitability for particular meetings.

- 1.2 At the time of writing this report meetings must continue to be virtual, but the Local Government Association (LGA) has raised with the Government whether physical meetings can be resumed. The Prime Minister's statement of 23 June, announcing some easing of the lockdown, did not refer to council meetings but said that "courts, probation services, police stations and other public services will increasingly resume face-to-face proceedings". The LGA has asked whether this could apply to council meetings. Legal advice is that the rules 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 - whether fully or in a 'hybrid' model (with some members attending in person and some virtually).
- 1.3 The technical solutions to enable hybrid meetings at the County Council are being put in place in the Council Chamber and should be available from October 2020. Such meetings will only be able to be held from the Chamber due to technical requirements for web casting. Hybrid meetings are likely to require more officer support, at least in the initial stages and will need to be tested before implementation. The number of members and officers able to attend in person will be limited by physical distancing rules.
- 1.4 The County Local Committee (CLC) meetings due to be held in June/July 2020 were cancelled due to COVID-19. Decisions due to be taken at these, relating to grant funding through the allocation of the Community Initiative Fund (CIF) and traffic regulation orders (TROs), have been carried out using urgent action procedures. The next round of CLC meetings is due to be held in October/November 2020.
- 1.5 September to December 2020 will be very busy for County Council business. The response to COVID-19 and any potential local outbreaks remain the priorities and the work will increase on developing a new corporate plan to refocus and prioritise plans and budgets - part of the Reset and Reboot framework debated at full Council in July. Improvement work for Children's Services and Fire and Rescue are at a critical stage and all of this will mean significant activity for members including scrutiny committees. The budget programme will be very challenging and the Council will need to respond to the ongoing impacts on the West Sussex economy, on residents, for young people's education, on the prospects for working-age adults and the wellbeing of those who are vulnerable. The implications of BREXIT will also need to be considered. It will therefore be important to ensure there is capacity to support member involvement in these issues during the autumn.
- 1.6 Making arrangements for CLCs during this period will be quite a draw on officer resources - primarily in Democratic Services. The webcasting of meetings or the organisation of local meetings with physical distancing will be significantly demanding. It has been possible to arrange for decisions by CLCs to be taken with all CLC members engaged but without the need for formal or virtual meetings. These arrangements can be maintained to support CIF and TRO decisions and discussion.

2. Proposal details

- 2.1 The list of council/committee meetings to the end of December 2020 is attached at **Appendix 1**. At this stage, it is proposed that all these will be virtual meetings. The Committee's approval is sought.

2.2 In considering the arrangements for virtual meetings, the Committee will wish to take account of the views of the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee (ECSC), set out at **Appendix 2**. Its members feel that virtual meetings have gone well, are in line with the Council's policy on climate change and have led to savings due to reduced need for refreshments, travel and councillor's time (see paragraph 3.3 for details of savings). ECSC also felt that three hours should be the maximum duration for any such meeting.

2.3 Members are asked to consider the capacity and resource requirements needed to facilitate the meetings and associated business due to be held up to December 2020, and specifically whether a resumption of CLCs can be supported. Two options for consideration are set out below:

2.3.1 **Resume CLCs**

- a) It is not possible to hold CLCs as public meetings due to current regulations. The risks associated with holding such community-based meetings would be high and would require significant additional resourcing.
- b) Holding CLCs as hybrid meetings is not an option. Such meetings can only be held in the Council Chamber and so cannot be provided locally.
- c) Virtual meetings require additional staffing from Democratic Services (see paragraph 3.1) and from other services including the Communities Team, which is heavily committed to the Council's COVID-19 response.
- d) Eleven CLC meetings in October/November would mean a big commitment during a very busy period when other business may need to be prioritised.
- e) The two joint area committees in Arun will be difficult to manage virtually as the membership is large, involving all three tiers (31 and 28 members). Arun District Council supports a resumption and has been asked to identify what business it proposes. Such business could be managed in other ways.
- f) The "Talk with Us" public questions will prove problematic for a virtual meeting. There may be other options for community feedback/questions.
- g) Decisions relating to the allocation of CIF and highways matters can be taken using Urgent Action procedures, with engagement from local members.

2.3.2 **Hold informal CLC meetings in October/November 2020**

- a) Cancelling the CLC meetings would ensure there is member and staff capacity to deal with the business anticipated to dominate the Council's agenda for the autumn.
- b) It is recognised that it is helpful for members to have a collective assessment of CIF allocation and the prioritisation of TROs, as well as an opportunity to discuss issues of local importance. It is therefore proposed that informal meetings of CLC members be arranged to consider these issues. Support for these could be met from within existing capacity.
- c) Outcomes of any informal meetings could be communicated to the public to provide openness and transparency, and members could engage with relevant stakeholders to inform discussions. For example, local members could engage with town/parish councils and other interested parties to gather views on TROs or other local issues.
- d) Any TRO and CIF decisions would be taken under the urgent action process, as was done during the spring/summer.
- e) Councillors are continuing to engage closely with residents and communities, but ways to enhance this could be considered (e.g. use of social media/CLC

Facebook pages to encourage questions to local members; inviting questions via email; members holding virtual surgeries).

- f) Updates on the COVID-19 response and other issues of local importance can continue to be provided to members, which they can then forward on to local networks as relevant. The Council continues to produce a newsletter for town/parish councils and COVID-19 updates are also shared with them, as well as with district/borough councils and MPs.

2.4 Details of consultation feedback received on plans for the autumn CLC meetings are set out at paragraph 4. Of the eleven county councillors and 22 town/parish councils responding, most wanted CLCs to resume as virtual meetings. However, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this feedback as these are very low response rates (17% of county councillors and 14% of town/parish councils). It is possible that the low response rate indicates a level of ambivalence or lack of interest in whether or not CLCs resume.

2.5 Governance Committee is therefore recommended to agree not to resume CLCs in October/November, but instead to hold informal meetings of CLC members as set out in paragraph 2.3.2. Plans for the spring can be reviewed later.

2.6 The public health emergency has had a significant impact on local residents, and it is timely to review the community role played by county councillors. The Member Development Group is developing plans for member induction following the County Council elections in May 2021 and it is proposed that this Group should carry out this review and report its findings to Governance Committee in January 2021. The areas for focus should include:

- What are the main issues of County Council responsibility raised locally, how these are currently dealt with and the role of county councillors.
- The best methods/forum for dealing with key local issues by members.
- Learning from COVID-19 in terms of the local member role and community engagement/leadership.
- What support councillors may need in fulfilling their community role, including local casework (to inform training and induction plans).
- Engagement with county councillors and partners as well as reference to consultation feedback received through the 2019 review of CLCs.

2.7 This Committee will continue to review member meeting plans during the public health emergency. In January 2020 this should include consideration of whether the February/March round of CLC meetings should be held.

3. Resources

3.1 Formal virtual meetings require more officer support, with most meetings requiring at least three officers from Democratic Services (clerking, advising, providing technical support and webcasting). This increases for larger meetings such as Full Council. All virtual meetings must be webcast, which has led to a significant increase in the level of officer support required, and which is likely to continue at least until the end of this year.

3.2 CLC meetings are normally only supported by one Democratic Services Officer. If CLCs resume, these eleven meetings will require between 34 and 44 hours of additional officer support (assuming CLC meetings last around

100 minutes). Capacity will need to be found from within the Service to enable this, requiring other tasks to be re-prioritised, including the ability to support other meetings. Holding informal meetings of CLC members and processing decisions as urgent actions can be met from existing capacity.

3.3 The move to holding all meetings virtually has generated savings of approximately £9,000 per month since April 2020 (based on previous years' spending). This is due to reductions in councillors' travel and meetings costs, as set out below:

- Member Travel - £6,000 per month
- Meeting costs (refreshments, venue hire etc) - £2,000 per month
- Member Training - £900 per month.

Factors taken into account

4. Consultation

4.1 Consultation on whether to resume CLCs was undertaken with all county councillors, Town and Parish Councils, Arun District Council (for the Joint Area Committees) and Council officers who support CLCs (Highways and Communities). Only twelve responses were received from county councillors, eleven of whom wanted CLCs to resume. They cited CLCs as an important mechanism for local engagement, especially in the current climate and felt the meetings would enable local people to receive an update on COVID-19 in their local areas – although it is not clear what that may be based on given the extensive arrangements for communication to residents and the absence of such meetings to date. It is notable that 57 members made no response, possibly suggesting a lack of support for CLCs for the large majority of members.

4.2 Responses were received from 22 Town and Parish Councils out of a possible total of 158. All 22 wanted CLCs to resume as virtual meetings. They were concerned about holding meetings in public, particularly given the age profile of those who normally attend. Arun District Council supported the resumption of Joint Arun Area Committees. Again it should be noted how few Parish Councils responded at all.

4.3 Officers from the Communities Team were not supportive of the resumption of CLC meetings due to staff capacity and the risks associated with holding face-to-face meetings. If meetings were to happen, they should be virtual. Highways Operations advised that a series of traffic regulation orders (TROs) would need to be prioritised in the autumn but felt that these decisions could be taken under the urgent action procedure with full member engagement. They recognised that this would remove the potential for public debate but suggested a virtual meeting with questions via social media could work.

5. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
Lack of democratic debate on issues	Plans will be led by members following consultation within groups

Risk	Mitigation
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 considered are set out in paragraphs 2.3.1 and 2.3.2. It is not proposed that CLCs be cancelled altogether (for the reasons set out in paragraph 2.3.2), but this, along with any other options identified by members, may 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

Appendix 1: List of meetings

Appendix 2: Letter from the Chairman of the Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee.

Background Papers

None