

Governance Committee

23 November 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 member meetings at its meetings during the public health emergency. This report provides an update on arrangements up to March 2021 and information on the impact of virtual meetings on Member attendance, public engagement via webcasts and financial and climate change implications. This should inform plans for future ways of working.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Approve the arrangements for Council/committee meetings to the end of March 2021, as set out in paragraph 2.1 and in Appendix 1;
- (2) Identify and agree any changes to ways of working for the future; and
- (3) 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.

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 April 2020 all formal meetings have been held virtually in line with government guidance. This will need to continue, particularly given new national restrictions in place from 5 November 2020. The technology to enable hybrid meetings (where some are present in person and others virtually) is being installed in the Council Chamber and so can only be used with that as a meeting base. It is not yet ready to be used. In addition, 'in person' attendance at formal meetings is not permitted due to the current national restrictions.
- 1.2 The organisation's capacity continues to be stretched due to the pressures of responding to COVID-19 and its wider impacts, alongside business as usual activities. Virtual meetings require additional staff support, particularly due to the need to webcast all formal meetings. During the first wave many staff were involved in supporting the corporate response, leading to reduced

capacity to support some Member meetings. The impact of the second wave on resources is still to be seen and it will be important to continue to monitor this, including the implications of local authorities undertaking contact tracing. There is likely to be limited capacity to support any additional Member meetings and it may be necessary to reduce some informal activities.

- 1.3 The last few months have also identified opportunities to embed better ways of working. Virtual meetings have all been webcast, increasing openness and enabling more people to watch all Council/committee meetings. Member attendance figures are generally higher, and Members with competing demands have been able to attend virtual meetings and events that would previously have been difficult to attend in person. There has been a significant reduction in Member travel and catering requirements, generating savings as well as a beneficial climate change impact.

2. Plans for meetings and learning from experience

- 2.1 At its last meeting the Committee agreed arrangements for formal meetings to the end of December 2020, with all to be held virtually. An updated list of meetings to the end of March 2021 is attached at **Appendix 1**. At this stage it is proposed that all these will be virtual meetings. Given the constraints on staff capacity across the organisation, it is also proposed that there should not be any additional formal meetings set up during this period for anything other than time critical, essential business. Informal meetings dealing with non-urgent or non-time critical matters such as briefings, task and finish groups and Member development should be minimised. The Committee may be asked to review plans for informal activity at its meeting in January 2021, taking account of resource and capacity implications. At this meeting it will also be asked to decide whether to resume County Local Committee meetings.
- 2.2 Additional equipment to enable hybrid meetings is being installed in the Council Chamber in County Hall. Given the need to ensure the safety and wellbeing of both councillors and staff, it is not proposed to use this for formal meetings until the next municipal year, when it is hoped 'in person' meetings will be possible. Hybrid arrangements will be tested on some informal meetings soon, to assess how well they work for different types of meeting.
- 2.3 All formal meetings during 2020/21 have been virtual and webcast, in line with the new government regulations that came into effect from 4 April. These allow meetings to be held virtually, provided public meetings can be heard and viewed if videoed via the internet. Microsoft Teams is now used for most meetings, although Skype is still used for meetings to enable external witnesses or members of the public to phone in if they are speaking. Whilst it is easier to join virtual meetings, they do require additional staff resource for webcasting and technical support. Considerable effort has been put into providing training and guidance for Members in using virtual meeting technology. Different skills are needed to manage and take part in virtual meetings.
- 2.4 Training on chairmanship skills has recently been provided to members with chairing roles, to include aspects of virtual meetings. Feedback is that it is

important to build breaks, including a reasonable length lunch break, into virtual meetings and that long online meetings can be tiring. Many hours of travelling time have been saved due to holding virtual meetings, but it is recognised that some have found the lack of in person contact difficult.

- 2.5 Member attendance rates are set out below, for all formal meetings and informal member development days held during 2019/20 and 2020/21 (up to 6 November 2020). Although the figures are not for an equivalent full year period, the data shows that there has been an increase in attendance for most meeting types. Increases may be due to the ability to join meetings virtually rather than needing to travel. This is likely to be of particular benefit to Members with large distances to travel, those who work and those with significant commitments such as caring responsibilities.

Table 1: Member attendance rates 2019/20 and 2020/21 (to 6 November)

Meeting	Attendance 2019/20	No. of Mtgs 2019/20	Attendance 2020/21	No. of Mtgs 2020/21
Cabinet	95%	5	100%	6
County Council	87%	6	94%	3
Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee (CYPSSC)	81%	8	93%	4
Environment and Community Services Scrutiny Committee (ECSSC)	78%	8	91%	3
Fire & Rescue Services Scrutiny Committee (FRSSC)	-	-	93%	2
Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee (HASC)	80%	5	95%	1
Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB)	89%	4	100%	1
Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee (PFSC)	83%	5	93%	4
Planning Committee	85%	3	91%	2
Rights of Way Committee (RoW)	62%	2	60%	1
Regulation Audit and Accounts Committee (RAAC)	80%	4	75%	2
Governance Committee	95%	5	100%	3
Standards Committee	56%	1	78%	1
Pensions Committee	96%	4	100%	3
Member Development Days	35%	16	59%	4

- 2.6 There have been both financial and Climate Change benefits due to meetings being held virtually. Since the beginning of April 2020, the County Council

has saved around £9,000 a month on Member meetings, through reduced member travel, refreshments and venue hire. This equates to around £54,000 from April to October. Of the monthly savings, around £6,000 a month is saved on travel. This equates to 13,000 miles not travelled and a saving of around four tons CO₂ equivalent per month. This equates to around 24 tons CO₂ saved from April to October 2020 through virtual meetings rather than Members travelling to meetings. Reductions in officer and others' travel is not included in these figures.

- 2.7 All formal meetings have been webcast since April 2020. Previously only meetings expected to generate high levels of public interest were webcast - County Council, Cabinet, Planning and Scrutiny Committees. This has increased the openness and transparency of meetings, with public, other Members, staff and partner organisations being able to watch discussions live or via the archive.
- 2.8 Viewing figures for webcasts are set out below, showing 'live' views and views of the archive. Archive views were correct at the time of writing but may increase slightly over time. Whilst the total average of webcast views is currently lower for 2020/21 than for 2019/20, there has not yet been a full year of meetings and previously only meetings likely to attract high levels of public interest were webcast. Average viewing figures in 2020/21 have increased for most of the meeting types set out in Table 3.

Table 2: Average webcast viewing figures for meetings held during 2020/21 (up to 6 November 2020)

Committee	No. of meetings	Average live views	Average archive views	Average total
Appointing Committee	1	1	9	10
Cabinet	6	107	207	314
County Council	3	202	297	499
CYPSSC	4	87	121	208
ECSSC	3	62	113	175
FRSSC	2	44	109	153
Governance	4	18	99	117
HASCSC	1	31	157	188
HWB	1	32	48	80
Pensions Advisory Board	1	8	54	62
Pensions Committee	3	8	39	47
PFSC	4	28	174	203
Planning	2	124	137	261
RAAC	2	13	79	92
RoW	1	15	43	58
Standards	1	7	13	20
Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)	1	6	10	16
Total	40	61	129	190

Table 3: Average webcast viewing figures for all meetings webcast during 2019/20

Committee	No. of meetings	Average live views	Average archive views	Average total
Cabinet	5	99	119	218
County Council	6	301	255	555
CYPSSC	7	65	137	202
ECSSC	6	71	156	226
HASCSC	5	19	52	71
PFSC	4	27	65	92
Planning	2	23	55	78
Total	35	98	133	231

2.9 The regulations allowing virtual meetings cease in May 2021, so it is not yet known whether it will be possible for formal meetings to continue to be virtual. However, the Committee may wish to consider whether the assumption should be that all informal meetings are held virtually in future, given the financial and climate change benefits as well as the saving in travel time for members and all involved.

2.10 It will be important for the Committee to continue to monitor council and committee meetings. It is due to review in January whether to resume County Local Committee meetings in February/March and this will include an update on the current situation and any resource/capacity issues.

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. During 2019/20 a total of 35 meetings were webcast. So far during 2020/21, 40 meetings have been webcast (1 April to 6 November).

3.2 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.

3.3 If all informal member meetings were to be held virtually in future, it is estimated that this could generate annual savings of approximately £20,000.

Factors taken into account

4. Consultation

4.1 There has not been opportunity to consult Members prior to the publication of this report. The Committee is asked to consider any wider consultation required relating to future meeting arrangements.

5. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigation
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 Other options will be considered within the Committee's debate.

7. Policy alignment and compliance

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. There are no social value, crime and disorder, human rights or legal implications. Climate Change implications are set out in paragraph 2, with virtual meetings leading to a reduction in travel and therefore in carbon emissions. Public health requirements relating to COVID-19 are informing all meeting arrangements.

Tony Kershaw

Director of Law and Assurance

Contact: Helen Kenny, Head of Democratic Services, 033 022 22532 or email: helen.kenny@westsussex.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix 1 – List of Council/committee meetings to end March 2020

Background Papers - None