

## **Governance Committee**

**18 January 2021**

### **Plans for Member Meetings**

#### **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 plans for all council/committee meetings. A list of the meetings due to be held up to the end of March 2021 is attached at **Appendix 1**. This report focuses on whether to resume County Local Committee (CLCs) meetings due to be held in February/March 2021. It also covers the issue of future arrangements for catering for member meetings.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee is asked to:

- (1) Note the list of formal meetings due to be held up to the end of March 2021, as set out at the Appendix;
- (2) Agree whether to resume County Local Committee meetings due to be held in February/March 2021;
- (3) Consider arrangements for catering at meetings attended by county councillors once 'in person' meetings resume; and
- (4) Agree that the Council's capacity and resources to support Member meetings should continue to be monitored by this Committee.

### **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. At its meeting in November 2020, the Committee agreed an assumption that meetings will continue to be held virtually until the end of the 2020/21 Municipal Year. It also agreed that informal member meetings should continue to be held virtually into the future, beyond COVID-19. The technology to enable hybrid meetings (where some are present in person and others virtually) is now available and being tested in the Council Chamber in Chichester. The intention is that this facility will be available for Council/committee meetings as soon as restrictions allow. The ongoing public

health emergency means that 'in person' attendance at formal meetings is not permitted due to the current national restrictions.

- 1.2 In light of the Committee's support for hybrid meetings in future, the Chairman has written to the Local Government Minister and the Leader has written to West Sussex Members of Parliament to urge them to ensure that permanent legislative provision is made to enable virtual and hybrid meetings to continue after the temporary legislation expires in May 2021.
- 1.3 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 from Democratic Services, particularly due to the need to webcast all formal meetings.
- 1.4 County Local Committees (CLCs) normally each meet three times per year. The Governance Committee agreed to cancel the meetings due to be held in June/July and October/November 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. The main reasons were the availability of officer resources given pressure from other pressing business and the fact that the main business of CLCs can be dealt with outside formal meeting arrangements. There has been no delay to decisions normally taken by CLCs (the allocation grant funding and prioritisation of traffic regulation orders). CLC meetings were held informally during October/November to enable county councillors discuss proposals ahead of any urgent action procedures. The next round of CLC meetings is due to be held in February/March 2021.
- 1.5 Prior to the current use of all virtual meetings, refreshments were provided for county councillors at certain meetings. For those held at County Hall in Chichester, catering is provided by the Martlets canteen. However, a proposal to close the canteen is currently being taken through as part of the Council's savings programme. This has implications for future member catering arrangements.
- 1.6 All refreshments, food as well as hot drinks, have been prepared and supplied by the Martlets kitchen and staff. The hot drinks machines around the County Hall campus available for use by members are also supported by the Martlets facilities and staff. Once the Martlets has closed no on-site refreshments can be supplied from Council facilities.

## **2. Options**

- 2.1 Members are asked to consider whether a resumption of CLCs can be supported. Two options are set out below for consideration:

### **2.2 Resume CLCs meetings**

- a) If CLCs are held during February/March 2021, current regulations mean that these would need to be held as virtual meetings. Holding CLCs as hybrid meetings is not an option as such meetings can only be held in the Council Chamber and so cannot be held locally or involve local residents.
- b) Holding 11 CLC meetings in February/March would require a significant staff commitment due to the additional support needed to hold virtual meetings. Whilst 'in person' CLC meetings only require one member of Democratic Services staff, virtual meetings currently require three, including a

webcaster. It is estimated that this amounts to between 34 and 44 additional hours of officer time required. Other services also support CLCs, including the Communities Team which is heavily committed to the Council's COVID-19 response. If CLCs resume, other business may need to be re-prioritised.

- c) There are no traffic regulation orders due to be considered at the February/March round of CLC meetings, so the only decisions that are due to be taken will relate to grant funding (Community Initiative Fund allocation).
- d) Feedback from county councillors and town and parish councils indicates that 'Talk with Us' is the most valuable part of CLC meetings. If CLCs are held virtually it would be necessary to explore ways to use technology to invite questions from the public, either during the meeting or in advance. This may increase the call upon staff to support the meetings.

### **2.3 Cancel formal CLC meetings, but hold informal sessions to input into any decisions required**

- a) Cancelling the CLC meetings would ensure there is member and staff capacity to deal with the business expected to dominate the Council's agenda for the spring.
- b) The autumn round of informal CLC meetings was successful, allowing for the quick processing of decisions as well enabling informal member discussions on other local matters. However, these informal meetings do not allow for any public involvement, which many see as a key element of CLCs.
- c) Councillors are continuing to engage closely with residents and communities during the public health emergency. The opportunity to host virtual 'Talk with Us' sessions through the CLC Facebook pages could be explored if the Committee decides to cancel the forthcoming CLC meetings.

2.4 Details of consultation are set out at paragraph 4, including feedback from the informal CLC meetings held in October/November, which highlighted the importance of local community engagement and a mechanism for councillors to hear residents' questions.

2.5 **Future catering arrangements for member meetings:** The move to all meetings being held virtually has led to financial savings due to reductions in member travel and catering. However, once in-person meetings resume, it will be important to have a clear approach to what provision will be made for refreshments. Using external sources to duplicate current arrangements for refreshments will mean costs could rise significantly. In addition, Martlets provide and maintain the three hot drinks machines currently available for county councillor use in the member rooms at County Hall.

2.6 Prior to this year the annual budget for member catering was approximately £26,000. Tea, coffee and water were provided at all meetings involving county councillors. Buffet lunches were provided at meetings finishing at or later than 1.15pm, with a hot meal provided at all full Council meetings.

2.7 Information provided by some other county councils on their catering arrangements is set out below for comparative purposes:

East Sussex	Only provide tea, coffee and tap water at meetings. No lunches are provided apart from exceptional circumstances. Breaks are factored into/between meetings to enable members to get lunch/bring their own. Drinks vending machines are provided.
Essex	Only provide hot drinks in the members' area. Hot lunch five times a year at full Council meetings, but members have to deduct the costs from their allowances. Only water is provided in most meetings.
Hampshire	Only provide tea, coffee and tap water at meetings. Lunches are provided only in exceptional circumstances or for multi-agency meetings being hosted and would consist of a finger-buffet/light refreshments. On full Council days, members make their own lunch arrangements.
Surrey	Only provide water for member meetings. A buffet lunch is provided for full Council meetings, the cost of which is met from members' subsistence.

2.8 Options for consideration by Governance Committee are:

- a) To cease all catering costs associated with meetings for members. This would mean no hot drinks or lunches would be provided at any meetings.
- b) To cease all catering other than for full Council meetings (which can finish after 4pm), with a buffet lunch provided by an external caterer (costs to be confirmed).
- c) To cease provision of hot drinks (saving approximately £6,000 pa) but continue to provide buffet lunches where required, with lunches provided by an external caterer (costs to be confirmed).
- d) If hot drinks are no longer to be provided, the potential to provide vending machines for these at County Hall could be explored.

2.9 The Committee may wish to consider consulting all county councillors on this matter, with a final decision to be recommended at its next meeting in March. The Committee is invited to indicate which of the above options should be explored.

### 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 the whole of 2019/20 a total of 35 meetings were webcast. So far during 2020/21 (1 April to 31 December), 50 meetings have been webcast.

3.2 CLC meetings are normally only supported by one Democratic Services Officer. If CLCs resume, these 11 meetings will require between 34 and 44 hours of additional officer support (assuming CLC meetings last around one hour and 40 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 within existing capacity.

- 3.3 The move to holding all meetings virtually has generated savings of approximately £2,000 per month due to no requirement for catering at meetings attended by councillors.
- 3.4 County councillors are able to claim subsistence costs for the cost of meals and refreshments from member allowances. Details of what can be claimed are set out in the Members' Allowances Scheme in the [Constitution](#). Currently, councillors can claim up to £9.15 lunch allowance when they are more than four hours away from their normal place of residence including the lunch time between 12 noon and 2.00pm.

## **Factors taken into account**

### **4. Consultation**

- 4.1 Consultation was carried out during the summer in advance of the Governance Committee decision in September to cancel the autumn round of CLC meetings. This consultation was with all county councillors and town and parish councillors. Of the 11 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 there were very low response rates (17% of county councillors and 14% of town/parish councils). It is possible that these low response rate indicated a level of ambivalence or lack of interest in whether CLCs resume.
- 4.2 Following that consultation, direct correspondence has been received from seven parish councils and one county councillor. The parish councils were all concerned that the decision to cancel CLC meetings was due to technical reasons and were all requesting that they resume as virtual meetings. The county councillor had received representations from one of the parish councils in their division asking for CLCs to resume. The county councillor also highlighted the importance to town and parish councils of the traffic regulation order (TRO) prioritisation process normally carried out by CLCs. They also raised the importance of public seeing democracy in action, particularly through TRO decisions being undertaken at CLCs.
- 4.3 County councillors were consulted as part of the informal CLC meetings in October/November 2020. All CLCs met informally apart from North Mid Sussex (which did not have any decisions to take). Key issues raised in these informal discussions were the importance of public engagement and concern at the loss of 'Talk with Us' as a mechanism for hearing residents' questions/issues. Several of the members attending these informal meetings felt that CLCs should resume in February/March.

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

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
Insufficient capacity to support meetings	Decisions will be informed by advice on resources and impact on critical services
Lack of public engagement if CLCs are cancelled	Promote alternative mechanisms for residents to raise issues with local councillors
Increased costs due to councillors' claiming subsistence for lunches or due to increased costs of external catering provision	Assess following implementation and review approach if costs increase

## **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. Virtual meetings have led to a reduction in travel and therefore in carbon emissions, helping to meet the Council's Climate Change commitments. 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 2021

### **Background Papers**

None