

From: Ben Watts, General Counsel

To: **Selection and Member Services Committee – 1 July 2021**

Subject: Future Arrangements for Committee Meetings

Classification: **Unrestricted**

1. Introduction

- a) I have provided regular updates to this Committee on our meeting arrangements. This is an opportune time to return to the Committee. As Members will know, the regulations that allowed formal meetings to be held remotely expired on 7 May and all affected meetings have had to be held physically from this point on. At the same time, the regulations around social distancing and other measures relating to the continuing Coronavirus situation also need to be adhered to.
- b) This meant the Annual General Meeting was held in Mote Hall. It is a tribute to both Members and Officers and all others involved that this was a successful meeting. The original deadline of exiting the Coronavirus restrictions has been delayed from 21 June and so this means that work is underway to ensure the next County Council meeting can go ahead in a regulation compliant way that maintains the safety of all Members staff or be delayed to allow it to take place in the Council Chamber.
- c) This also means that the arrangements that were put in place when the remote meeting regulations came to an end will continue for the medium term. Members have been advised that the bulk of meetings that do not legally have to be held physically, such as Member briefings, training and Cabinet Committee meetings, will continue to be held remotely, on Tuesday and Wednesday wherever possible. To respond to the Member request for consistent days for meetings and to maximise efficiency and the best planning of meetings, physical meetings are currently being held on Wednesday and Thursday wherever possible. Guidance has been shared with Members to ensure these are run efficiently and safely.

2. Meeting Arrangements Going Forwards

- a) As the relevant accountable Director, I have a duty to ensure my staff are able to work in a safe and Covid-secure environment. I also have a duty of care to Members to ensure that the arrangements that are put in place are also safe.
- b) Decisions as to what KCC's approach to meeting provision should be are taken by the Executive balancing the different requirements and making a judgment based on information about the risks involved in the different options. The wider group of Members will continue to be consulted through Political Groups, County Council, and the relevant Committees.
- c) Once lockdown restrictions have been removed, it is the intention to have a more substantive discussion about the arrangement of the Council's meetings moving forward. This will reflect on the views of the entire Membership of the

Council and consider the implications and resourcing of the options to allow an informed decision.

3. Remote Meetings: The Future

- a) It is uncertain at the time of writing whether the Government will find a way to reintroduce the statutory ability to hold formal meetings remotely in some form – either as a short-term measure in response to the delay in lifting lockdown restrictions, or by making a longer-term decision.
- b) Ending on 17 June 2021, the Government held a call for evidence about remote meetings. The KCC response to this call for evidence is set out in Appendix 1, 1a, and 1b.
- c) As can be seen, in common with the local government sector more widely, the KCC response was in favour of having local flexibility to best suit our needs. It is my professional view that the decision around whether Kent County Council utilise virtual meetings and if so to what extent, should be a decision for Members of this Council. This does not mean that if local authorities were granted the power to hold formal meetings remotely that there would be no more physical meetings. This would need to be a decision taken at the time.
- d) There are financial and environmental benefits to holding remote meetings, but there are also advantages to holding many of them in a physical setting. Indeed, for some, it is the most appropriate way of dealing with certain matters. In practice, most authorities are likely to have a ‘mixed economy’ of remote and physical meetings to best suit the business needs of the council.
- e) We are also continuing to explore the options for holding meetings on a hybrid basis to ensure that we are best placed to take advantage of any changes in legislation and technology.

3. Recommendation:

That the Selection and Member Services Committee note the report.

4. Background Documents

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, ‘Local authority remote meetings: call for evidence’, open 25 March 2021 to 17 June 2021,
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/local-authority-remote-meetings-call-for-evidence/local-authority-remote-meetings-call-for-evidence>

5. Contact details

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