

Report to: **Governance Committee**

Date: **23 June 2020**

By: **Assistant Chief Executive**

Title: **Virtual meetings – supplementary Standing Orders**

Purpose: **To consider proposed procedure rules in relation to Council meetings held virtually as a result of Covid-19 disruption.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Governance Committee is recommended to recommend the County Council to:

- 1) agree the supplementary Standing Orders at appendix 1 to apply to meetings held virtually under temporary meetings regulations until 7 May 2021;**
 - 2) agree that Member non-attendance at a meeting during the period covered due to issues related to the virtual nature of the meeting be considered as an absence for a reason approved by the Council in relation to attendance requirements; and**
 - 3) agree to amend the Constitution accordingly.**
-

1. Background

1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic and associated social distancing requirements are impacting upon the County Council's ability to hold its meetings in public in the usual way. This issue has been recognised by Government and temporary regulations have been issued which relax a number of legal requirements on local authorities around physical access to meetings and papers and enable meetings to be held virtually, for example using video conferencing technology. ([The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels \(Coronavirus\) \(Flexibility of Local Authority Police and Crime Panel Meetings\) \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2020](#), which came into effect on 4 April 2020.)

1.2 The regulations are broad and allow for councils to make specific local arrangements to suit local circumstances. The regulations also provide the option for councils to adopt additional Standing Orders to formalise local procedures for virtual meetings. This report outlines proposed supplementary Standing Orders to formalise the County Council's current approach to virtual meetings during the period of disruption due to Covid-19.

2. Supporting information

2.1 The procedure rules (also known as Standing Orders) set out within the Council's Constitution govern the conduct of the formal meetings, usually held in public at County Hall, which are required to conduct the business of the authority. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions meetings are currently being held virtually using video conferencing technology under the temporary regulations.

2.2 Virtual meetings have been taking place since early April, supported by guidance and training provided to Members. This included a full Council meeting on 12 May. The learning from these initial virtual meetings has been incorporated into the development of procedures to ensure the effectiveness of meetings undertaken in this format.

2.3 It is now proposed that the County Council agrees a supplementary section of Standing Orders to formalise the current approach to virtual meetings, taking the provisions

of the regulations into account. The proposed additional Standing Orders are attached as appendix 1. These will confirm the position of what constitutes a valid formal virtual meeting until the expiry of the regulations in May 2021 and will support the continuation of core County Council business during the public health emergency.

2.4 The temporary national regulations make clear that their provisions supersede existing local Standing Orders where relevant. However, the regulations also indicate that individual authorities may wish to adopt additional Standing Orders to reflect local procedures on issues such as public access to meetings or documents, and voting procedures.

2.5 The proposed supplementary Standing Orders also include provision for Member non-attendance at a meeting during the period covered (to 7 May 2021) due to issues related to the virtual nature of the meeting. A range of issues may be experienced including technical difficulties, failure of IT equipment or services, or the fact that some Members are less familiar with the technology or find it more challenging operating in this technical environment than others and so may not be able access the virtual meetings because of this. It is recommended that these be considered as an absence for a reason approved by the Council in relation to attendance requirements.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The Committee is recommended to recommend the County Council agrees the supplementary Standing Orders outlined in this report in order to formalise the Council's approach to virtual meetings which are being held to enable core business to be conducted during the period of disruption due to the Covid-19 virus.

PHILIP BAKER
Assistant Chief Executive

Contact Officer: Claire Lee
Tel: 07523 930526
Email: Claire.lee@eastsussex.gov.uk

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None