

Meeting arrangements

Timing of Meetings

The County Council is one of the largest councils in the country and holds several hundred meetings each year, on its range of political governance arrangements – Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees and non-Executive Committees. A wide range of informal meetings are also part of the political governance arrangements, ranging from panels, boards, groups and pre-agenda meetings.

Because of the number of meetings held, West Sussex has long had a pattern of meetings that allows for up to three meetings/sessions a day, avoiding clashes for individual members – these are morning, afternoon and evening. Naturally, some of these meeting times will be more or less convenient for different members depending upon their personal circumstances. One particular challenge in West Sussex is the distance that some members will need to travel to reach County Hall, Chichester – a one-way journey from Crawley or East Grinstead can take an hour and a half.

Recognising that morning meetings will generally be easier for those members with caring responsibilities for school-age children, the morning meetings have a start time of 10.30 a.m., allowing school drop-offs in places like East Grinstead and Crawley before travelling to County Hall, Chichester. These meetings traditionally finish at 1 p.m., allowing time to return for school pick-ups. On occasions some meetings may finish later than this.

The afternoon meetings begin at 2.15 pm and are typically shorter meetings – Governance and Standards are two that are organised in this time slot.

The informal County Community Forums (CLFs) are usually held in the evening – this is because they are local events held in the local area. A county-wide forum taking place in the evening at County Hall, Chichester, might meet from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m., making a very late night for members travelling back to further parts of the county. There are usually three CLF sessions a year for each member, giving capacity for attending other meetings in their divisions – most parish councils and district council meetings take place in the evening, which a local member may try to attend, or likewise residents' associations and other community groups. Limiting the number of evening events connected to the County Council makes it much more achievable for members on other councils to fulfil the additional roles.

Meeting Dates

Another consequence of a very busy member diary is that meeting days are not always consistent throughout the year – Dates are consistent in many cases:

Monday – Governance, Standards and Regulation, Audit and Accounts Committees.

Tuesday – Cabinet and Planning and Rights of Way Committee.

Thursday – Executive Leadership Team meets in the morning.

Friday – County Council.

The main committees that are not always consistent are the Scrutiny Committees – these are scheduled for Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to ensure that the five committees meet reasonably close together in a cycle, with the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee coming last.

Officers preparing the member diary attempt to provide as much consistency as possible in sticking to certain meetings on certain days, but it is not possible to achieve this entirely with the current range of meetings. Meetings are not scheduled within the published local authority school holidays. The main exception to this is that the February County Council meeting is often within the half term holiday as a necessity because six weeks' notice must be given to district councils of the amount of council tax to be collected.

In-person and virtual meetings

Under the Local Government Act 1972 for formal decision-making meetings, a member is only present at a meeting if they are in the room at the time. This is important for voting and for counting towards a quorum for the meeting. Decision-making committee meetings are therefore held in person, usually at County Hall, Chichester.

The option for participants to join meetings virtually is made available within legislative constraints using technology installed during the pandemic. This is often used for witnesses and officers. This option is also particularly important for those who may need to isolate or who have a health condition or disability making travel difficult, or where it means a member with caring responsibilities can participate more easily. Scrutiny committees which do not take decisions are able to meet either virtually or in-person but this option is not available for other formal committee or the Cabinet. Meetings held virtually and which require public access are webcast.

The requirement to meet in person is not in place for informal meetings, as by definition, they are informal and have no delegated powers. Most informal member meetings are held virtually, given the financial and climate change benefits as well as the saving in travel time for members and all involved. This is also beneficial to members with work, caring and other commitments and for those with disabilities. Some informal meetings are held in person where this is considered helpful (e.g. where group work is required). This is decided on a case-by-case basis – using the test of whether the activity and output would be notably more beneficial by being in person and is agreed through discussion between the responsible lead officer and the members affected, or the member with most direct involvement in the event.