

1. SECTION 13 – REMOTE/HYBRID MEETING ETIQUETTE

1. Preparing for the Meeting: The Agenda and Your Objectives

- 1.1 Formal meetings conducted remotely in particular will require clear objectives. The Chair/Mayor, or where necessary, the Vice-Chair/Deputy Mayor, and Members are likely to need to be more explicit about these than would normally be the case.
- 1.2 Any reference to meetings conducted remotely also refers to meetings that are conducted using hybrid arrangements (i.e. some participants attending in a remote capacity and some are attending the physical meeting space) as appropriate.
- 1.3 Beforehand, the Chair/Mayor will need to be in close communication with Officers, Democratic Services and other Committee Members (or other meeting participants). This preparation will need to involve reaching some kind of understanding on:
- What the meeting is about, and the possible purpose and outcomes for every item on that meeting's agenda;
 - What information and paperwork will need to be made available in order for these outcomes to be delivered;
 - Where Members or other meeting participants will want to contribute – and where and how public participation might need to be facilitated;
 - Where these people might need particular support in order to participate in the way that they want.

These conversations can be relatively informal; they can be carried out by the Chair/Mayor, a relevant Officer/Clerk or by other Members who might be able to assist.

2. Preparing for the Meeting: Practical Arrangements

- 2.1 Immediately prior to the meeting, participants - Members, Officers and others - will need to make sure that they are ready to take part productively.
- 2.2 These steps are particularly important for participants in meetings viewable by the public but apply to any others:
- Ensure that you are dialling in from an area in your home where you are less likely to be disturbed;
 - Ensure that your broadband connection is sufficiently stable to join the meeting. If your connection has low bandwidth, depending on the facilities and support provided by the Council (and your home's mobile reception) you might find it easier to join using your mobile phone's data allowance, or if absolutely necessary by making a voice-only call (although see below);
 - Ensure that you use the official Council remote video conferencing background;
 - Your name (possibly your mobile number, if you are calling from a phone) is likely to be shown onscreen if you are appearing in video – ensure that you are comfortable with whatever information is being displayed (ask Democratic Services for assistance if you require your on screen name to be amended);

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- Ensure that the camera is positioned to provide a clear, front-on view of your face. This may involve thinking about lighting in the room you're in (for example, sitting in front of a window may plunge your face into shadow). It may also involve putting your webcam, laptop or tablet on top of a couple of books so that you can look into the camera face on;
- Ensure that you are familiar with the functions in Microsoft Teams. The key functionality with which you should familiarise yourself is:
 - a) The ability to screen-share, and the ability to work collaboratively on documents as meetings progress;
 - b) The ability to use the "raise hand" feature (by which the Chair/Mayor can be made aware that you want to speak). This is likely to be more effective than physically waving at the camera to catch the Chair/Mayor's attention, which can be distracting;
 - c) The ability to participate in chat. See chat etiquette in Teams below;
 - d) The ability to mute your microphone. As a general rule you should always have your microphone muted when you are not speaking. Ideally, you should use earphones or a headset to participate in meetings as it reduces the risk of feedback from using your device's external speaker.

2.3 The chat feature and breakout options.

2.3.1 Microsoft Teams provides two forms of additional functionality;

- A chat function, by which meeting participants can communicate with each other in written form;
- The facility to establish "breakout" spaces, in which the Chair/Mayor or Democratic Services can place participants.

2.3.2 The use of breakout spaces is less likely to be useful for formal meetings – although it could provide a way to exclude the public where a Committee moves into a private session.

2.3.3 There are a range of ways to try to use these tools. It may feel odd to actively use a chat function to discuss the meeting in parallel to verbal contributions being made; it might be seen as undermining the transparency of the meeting. In physical meetings the use of texting is discouraged because it suggests that Members are not fully engaged with what is happening in the room. However, it can provide a mechanism for the Chair/Mayor and other Members to communicate to ensure that things run smoothly.

2.3.4 The chat function will usually need to be limited to Committee Members, Officers and Democratic Services – but Committee Members should treat conversations in chat as if they are happening in public.

2.4 Appropriate use of chat:

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- The Chair/Mayor cueing up the order in which they will invite contributions from Committee Members (in person, this kind of action can be accomplished by turns of the head, nods and brief eye contact – something which is impossible remotely);
- A Committee Member asking for a point of clarification to be raised or to ask a question or make a comment (again, in person this kind of thing might be done by way of a note or nods or eye contact);
- The Chair/Mayor reminding Members of the focus of the discussion currently under way (which may be especially important to maintain focus and flow);
- Attempting to resolve minor technical problems. A Member might have difficulty seeing or hearing what is happening, or contributing;
- The provision of advice to the Chair/Mayor on procedure by Democratic Services (although this is often best done verbally). It is usual for Democratic Services and/or the Head of Law & Democracy to sit adjacent to or nearby the Chair/Mayor to offer advice unobtrusively – working remotely, this is of course not possible.

2.5 Inappropriate use of chat:

- Use of the chat function to carry out a parallel, substantive conversation about the issues under discussion;
- Use of the chat function for extraneous chitchat or for political-based dialogue.

2.6 Challenges associated with audio-only dialling in:

2.6.1 Participants may be unable to join the meeting via videocall due to insufficient bandwidth or other technical issues which can make participation in the meeting more difficult. Members will need to accept that although audio-only communication is less effective than video communication, for some meetings and some individuals it will be the only possibility.

2.6.2 Active participation - It is too easy for audio-only participants to be forgotten or for them to find it difficult to “break in” to a flowing Committee conversation. Audio participants may also be unable to use meeting features used by others – such as chat or using shared screens.

2.6.3 Engagement - It is far less easy to remain active and engaged in meetings on voice-only calls. People’s attention can and will wander. Audio-only communication can be difficult and alienating for those attempting to “observe” or seeking to contribute as witnesses or members of the public. It is easy to lose track of who is talking and who is “in the room”.

2.6.4 Following the agenda - With no way of sharing screens, it will be difficult to see if people are following presentations and reports (or whether they even have that material in front of them). This will make certain meetings – planning, licensing, and quasi-judicial meetings such as education appeals – a particular challenge.

2.7 Ways to overcome these challenges:

2.7.1 Such meetings will require more preparation, and more people will need to be involved in that preparation.

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2.7.2 Agendas and Officer reports in particular will need to be focused with very clear outcomes and objectives. Decision-making meetings in particular will demand this approach.

2.7.3 The Chair/Mayor may need to speak individually to Members of the Committee beforehand to agree focus, questioning themes and outcomes – this may also include discussion of the structure of the meeting and whether there are specific things that individual Members want to raise.

2.8 Other accessibility issues:

2.8.1 For Members:

- Members come from all walks of life. Skills, and the capacity to learn new things, may vary, as will the confidence to demonstrate these skills publicly. Some people's home environment may make it very difficult to join a remote meeting for two or three hours. Some people may have disabilities or impairments – hidden or otherwise - which present barriers. Sometimes, these issues may only emerge after remote meetings have occurred. Convening meetings remotely is something that many Members will take to very easily; for others it will be a significant challenge, and not because they are "unwilling" to engage or being obstructive. We have to find ways for these arrangements to work well for everyone.

2.8.1.1 This may involve making changes such as:

- Providing more opportunities for Members to feed views to the Council and to senior Officers informally – in writing and through one-to-one conversation (this is expanded upon below). Senior Officers will already be available to speak to Members but there may also be a need for proactive communication from them to Members inviting conversation;
- Using discussion at group meetings to influence and inform the design of remote arrangements. These Member-led environments may be the best space to tease out what may be complex and sensitive issues for some Members.

2.8.2 For non-Council participants:

- For planning and licensing meetings, and other quasi-judicial meetings, there will be a need for non-Council participants (often, applicants or appellants) to contribute to the meeting. Before meetings Members and/or Democratic Services will need to make direct contact with these individuals to;
- Set out how the meeting will run. Material previously distributed to individuals about the process of meetings may no longer be accurate. Standing orders may be applied and disappplied as necessary, producing

uncertainty. A fair process requires applicants to be aware of these possibilities and to raise any concerns before the meeting is convened;

- Identify any particular access needs. These may be technical – around the use of certain platforms – but may also relate to the need for clarity on some of the behaviour and etiquette issues identified elsewhere in this guide;
- Provide any necessary reassurance. People may have privacy concerns about joining remote meetings and may find it to be an unsettling and alien experience.
- The Chair/Mayor should ensure that they are aware of any issues and that proactive steps are taken to address them.

2.8.3 For members of the public:

- Streaming meetings online has removed many access barriers for members of the public wishing to observe and engage. But it also erects other barriers – around having a device to screen and sufficient data allowance to view. Where the technology exists and/or permits, to aid access the council may consider indexing the recorded feeds of meetings to allow people to navigate within videos – including adding captions and explanations on agenda items. They may also wish to consider other ways by which information about the proceedings of meetings might be shared.
- It is vital that Members, and other participants, remember that the public will be observing meetings. This may be easily forgotten, where participants are joining meetings from home or viewing the livestreams via YouTube. When connected to formal meetings via webcam or audio-only, Members and Officers must remember that what they are saying and doing is visible to the public in just the same way as it would be in the Council Chamber/Committee Room.
- Some of these issues may be heightened in the case of hybrid meetings. Behavioural dynamics between those in the room, and those joining remotely, may be difficult to predict.

2.8.3.1 Disruption:

There is a chance that members of the public will seek to disrupt proceedings. This risk might draw councils into adopting a defensive approach to the use of video conferencing tools. This can be managed by:

- Not enabling video for public participants (other than where they are making an active contribution to the meeting), and muting mics as a matter of course;
- Ensuring that members of the public accessing the meeting either to observe or participate are aware of behaviour expectations and that the Chair/Mayor or Democratic Services can remove people if these expectations are not met.

The Council currently broadcasts livestreams of all meetings (excluding exempt/private sessions) via YouTube to avoid the necessity for members

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of the public to “join” the meeting itself. This helps to manage the risk of disruption, but the Council may need to think about the need for comment moderation on YouTube or whether comments can be disabled altogether.

Equally, there is a case for allowing space for a form of disruption or dissent. Full Council in particular can be a space for protest, which is sometimes disruptive in nature. Members and Democratic Services may need to think about how they can facilitate dissent and protest in a way that supports free speech, even if that may be inconvenient to the operation of individual meetings.

2.8.4 Specific advice for Democratic Services and/or Committee Chair/Mayors:

In a remote meeting, Democratic Services and/or the Chair/Mayor should ensure that they have the facility to:

- Hear and, for participants with video enabled, see, those involved in the meeting;
- Mute and unmute participants;
- Remove participants from the call, including “pausing” the call (or creating a private breakout space) if the Committee needs to go into a private session;
- Share a screen with other participants (for example in the case of the use of presentations);
- See when Members wish to contribute to the meeting and invite them to do so;
- Privately, take advice on procedural matters from an appropriate officer.

This will require training, and support. Some Chair/Mayors may be uncertain about their ability to carry out these tasks. For some they might be more comfortable leaving Democratic Services to do some of these activities but the nature of managing and facilitating contributions means that really the Chair/Mayor must be the one to do most of the above.

2.8.5 The Chair/Mayor’s role in setting expectations:

- The Chair/Mayor will need to be explicit about behavioural, and other, expectations. Often these are left implicit at the beginning of meetings, but the novelty of working remotely may require that the Chair/Mayor runs through conduct and behaviour standards in advance – particularly where large numbers of people are involved;
- Some Chairs/Mayors may wish to specify that all contributions must be made “through the Chair/Mayor”, with that person controlling the muting/unmuting of mics. This may limit free-flowing conversation but is likely to keep things more focused.
- The Chair/Mayor will need to address members of the public who may be observing and highlighting the process, including the circumstances in which they may be able to contribute;
- The Chair/Mayor will need to remind Members of the need to introduce themselves both at the start of the meeting and at the start of every contribution where people are participating in the meeting in an audio-only capacity.

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Other Committee Members, and Officers, will need to think about how they can support the Chair/Mayor to carry out their role. The amount of work required to effectively chair a meeting is likely to increase due to the various considerations required when holding a remote or hybrid meeting.

SUMMARY

- 1. Join the meeting no later than 15-minutes before the start** to allow you and Democratic Services the opportunity to test that all your equipment is working correctly and your connection is stable, and to troubleshoot any issues in good time.
- Remember to **charge your device** in advance of the meeting and ensure you are **positioned close to a power source** or have a **portable power bank** ready in the event of battery running low. Notify Democratic Services if battery life is critically low.
- When you first join and throughout the meeting, **you need to mute yourself** until such time as you have indicated to speak - by “virtually” raising your hand - at which point the Chair will be notified and will invite you to speak. You will then need to unmute yourself and **mute yourself** once again when you have finished speaking.
- Barring any connectivity issues, **Members will be required to keep their cameras on** at all times as this indicates their presence throughout the entirety of a debate which may affect Members’ right to vote (where legislation permits). Officers and other participants are encouraged to keep their cameras on when speaking/participating.
- Turn off all background noise sources** (e.g. radio, television, mobile etc.) and try to **separate yourself** from any interruptions by using a separate room from other individuals in your household. This is important for spousal or related Members etc.
- Ensure that **other home smart devices are turned off** (e.g. Amazon Echo, Google Home/Nest, Apple HomePod etc.) as such devices could inadvertently turn on and/or record the meeting etc. This applies to any other devices which may interfere etc.
- Your video should show the Council approved corporate background. Suitably **position yourself** and **speak slowly and clearly** in the direction of your microphone. Be careful not to allow exempt or confidential papers to be seen.
- When speaking, **clearly mention** and/or **signpost** to the relevant report, page number, paragraph or slide etc. so that all participants have a clear understanding of what is being discussed at all times. Where possible, reports will be shared on screen.
- Democratic Services will **pre-set, control and adjust** where necessary the **layout of remote participants** on the Teams screen so that the correct visual balance is struck between in-person and remote participants, and those viewing the live-stream.
- If you need **assistance** joining the meeting, or experience any **technical difficulties** during the meeting, contact Democratic Services on **(0116) 257 2755** or **send a chat message** to the Host and/or Co-Host(s) in Teams (see above regarding chat).

“...Councillors and Officers should assume at all times that what they are saying and doing is visible to the public in just the same way as it would be in the committee room...”

- Centre for Public Scrutiny (April 2020)