

Whitchurch Town Council - Virtual Meeting Procedure

Introduction

Town and Parish Councils have been given provision under The Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 (“the 2020 Regulations”) to hold legal virtual meetings in order that Town Council business can be maintained.

The Town Council has chosen to use the Zoom platform in order that the meeting is publicly available.

Remote attendance at Council meetings is permitted as long as certain conditions are met. These include that councillors are able to:

- Hear and be heard by the other Councillors in attendance.
- Hear and be heard by any members of the public entitled to attend the meeting.
- A visual solution is preferred, but audio is sufficient. This also relates to members of the public attending the meeting also being heard.

The regulations are clear that a meeting is not limited to those present in the same place, but includes electronic, digital or virtual locations (internet locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers).

Advertising meeting

The Clerk will host the meeting using the Town Council account. The meeting will be a formal Town Council meeting and will be held using the agenda and summons which the Clerk will publish. A code and link to the virtual meeting will be published on the agenda and displayed on the noticeboard and Town Council website in order that the public are able to attend, just as they would be able to attend a meeting in the Civic Centre. Attendees will also have the ability to dial in to the meeting via telephone.

Attendance of Press and Public

The Regulations clarify that a meeting being “open to the public” includes access to the meeting through remote means (video conferencing, live webcast, interactive streaming). Where a meeting is accessible to the public through such remote means the meeting is deemed open to the public whether or not members of the public are able to attend the meeting in person.

Joining the meeting

Councillors are encouraged to join the meeting promptly at least ten minutes before the scheduled start time in order to avoid disrupting the meeting. Attendees will collect in the Zoom ‘waiting room’ prior to the meeting.

Meeting protocol

Meetings will be governed by the usual Standing Orders, Financial Regulations and associated policies. All attendees will be set to ‘mute’ on entry to the meeting and only the Chairman of the meeting will remain unmuted. All other participants if they wish to speak will be invited to unmute. As the ‘Host’, the Clerk will have the ability to mute or remove anyone deemed a nuisance at the Chairman of the meeting’s request.

Meeting participants may wish to protect their personal environment by choosing a virtual background in the Zoom Settings 'Virtual Background' or alternatively should consider what can be seen behind them while on camera.

All Councillor attendees will display their name in order for the public to be able to identify them, just as they would at an in-person meeting.

Meeting Etiquette

- Mute your microphone when you are not talking.
- Only speak when invited to do so by the Chair.
- If you are not using video then please state your name.
- The only person to keep on their microphone throughout the meeting is the Chair.

Public Participation

Participation by members of the public will continue in line with the Council's Standing Orders. This can include speaking, asking questions and/or making representations.

As with meetings in the Civic Centre, members of the public will be given the opportunity to speak during public participation, but will not be permitted, unless invited to do so by the Chairman, to speak at other times. Anyone wanting to speak should raise their hand using 'raise hand' in the options within the Participants section or by waving if they're using a camera so that the Chairman can see. Members of the public must introduce themselves if they wish to speak.

The Chairman and Clerk have the ability to mute and the ability to remove a disruptive member of public if necessary and this should be made apparent at the beginning of the meeting.

Declarations of Interest

If a Councillor has declared an interest in an item on the agenda, they will be placed in the waiting room for the duration of that agenda item. Once the item has been concluded, they will be re-admitted. In order to protect participants from malware, the 'chat', file sharing and screen sharing function will be disabled during the meeting. If necessary, the Clerk will display any documents required using the 'share screen' function.

The Meeting and Debate

For Councillors who wish to speak in the debate, they should either click on the raise hand facility or raise their hand on the video screen and await to be asked to unmute and speak by the Chair. If a Councillor is using a telephone without a screen to access the meeting they should make the Chair aware that they wish to speak. Once Councillors have spoken, they must mute themselves again to prevent unnecessary background noise.

Voting on Motions

Within the Zoom facility, there is a straightforward mechanism to deal with voting. When the Chair asks the Council or Committee to vote, those in favour of the proposal should use the "thumbs up" icon, those against should use the "thumbs down" icon. No response will represent an abstention.

If a Chair does not wish to use this mechanism, they may choose to ask each Councillor to vote in turn. If this is the case, Councillors should express their vote verbally and the Clerk will record the outcome of the vote and announce it to the meeting.

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Disturbance from Members of the Public

In line with Standing Orders, if any member of the public interrupts a meeting the Chair will warn them accordingly. If that person continues to interrupt or disrupt proceedings the Chair will mute them or remove them as a participant from the meeting.

Confidential Items

There are times when Council meetings are not open to the public, when confidential, or “exempt” issues – as defined in Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 – are under consideration.

It is important to ensure that there are no members of the public at remote locations able to hear or see the proceedings during such meetings. Any Councillor in remote attendance could be in breach of the Council’s Code of Conduct if they fail to disclose that there are other persons present who may be able to see and/or hear the meeting if they are not entitled to do that. If there are members of the public and press listening to the open part of the meeting, then the Chair will remove those participants from the meeting at the appropriate time. Before this happens, the members of public and press must be made aware why they are being removed from the meeting. It would be good practice to turn off smart speakers such as Amazon Echo (Alexa), Google Home or smart music devices. These could inadvertently record phone or video conversations, which would not be appropriate during the consideration of confidential items.

After the Meeting

Participants should leave the meeting by clicking on the red “end meeting” button to hang up. The Chair can also end the meeting for all participants. Meeting minutes will be published on the Council’s website in the usual manner.

Technical Issues

If any meeting participant identifies a failure of the remote participation facility, the Chair should declare a recess while the fault is addressed. If it is not possible to address the fault and the meeting becomes inquorate through this fault, the meeting will be abandoned until such time as it can be reconvened. If the meeting is quorate, then it should continue.

Those attending remotely would be aware and accept that the meeting would continue, and a vote would be taken without their attendance. If the meeting was due to determine an urgent matter or one which is time-limited and it has not been possible to continue because of technical difficulties, the Chair and Clerk shall explore such other means of taking the decision as may be permitted under the full Council resolution detailed in minute of the Council meeting dated 2020.

This procedure was considered at a meeting on _____ and will be reviewed in one year.